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Experiencing Access: Issues for Policy and Practice

A Case Study

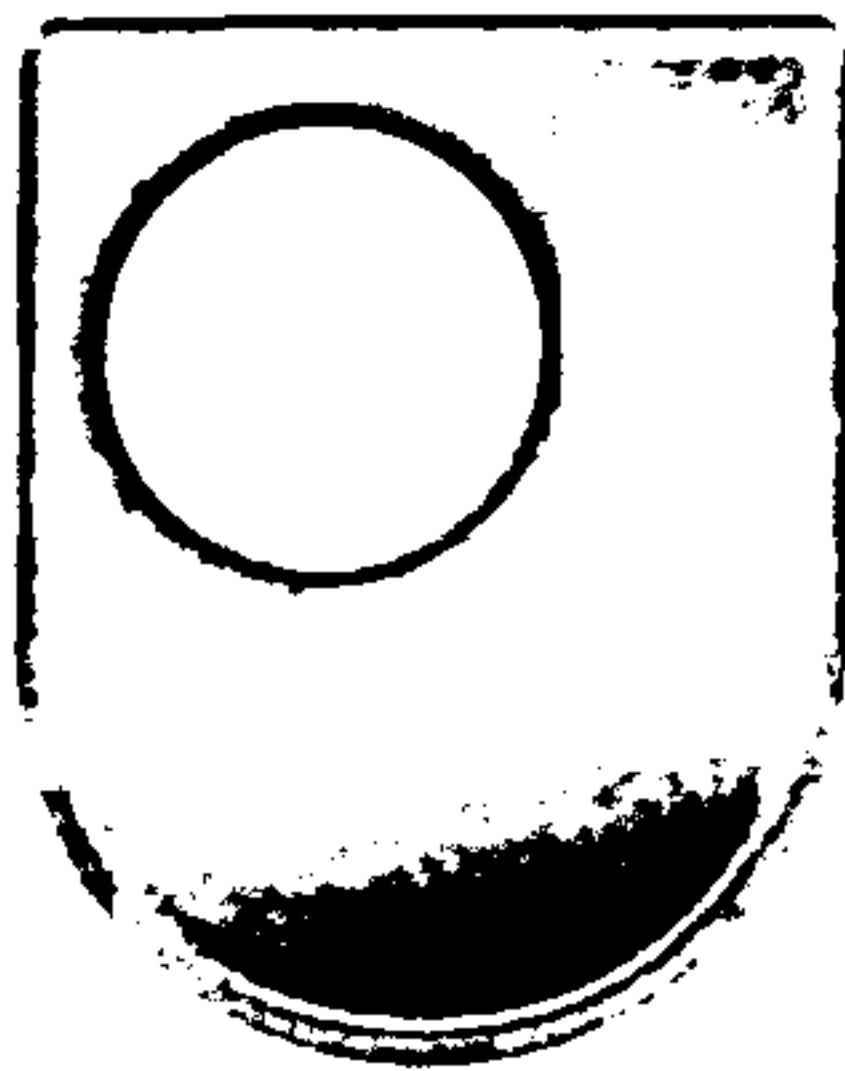
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Abstract

The study explores the experiences of Access to Business students on a course that is characterised as diverse in terms of age, ethnicity and nationality. The key research question asked how students from diverse backgrounds experience learning on an Inner-City Access course. Sub-questions explored the extent to which the course attracted students from groups under-represented in higher education, how a classroom characterised as diverse affected the formation and functioning of learning communities and attitudes towards student dropout.

I adopted an interpretive, naturalistic method of enquiry, theorising the Access to Business programme as a bounded system (Smith, 1978) and conducting a qualitative case study. From a review of the literature I develop a theoretical framework incorporating habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1984); communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and the relationship between commitment and student dropout (Tinto, 1975). A common thread running through the framework is that of identity and difference.

The main research method I employed was the semi-structured interview. Other methods included focus groups, questionnaires and meetings. As a teacher/researcher I was also able to draw on my experience of teaching the students that provided the research data.

The main findings of my research reveal the way aspects of identity help to shape the way the classroom functions as a learning community: age, age difference, ethnicity, nationality and attitudes towards study play a part in the way students interact and form groups in the classroom. Diversity is seen as a resource that others can draw on to support learning. The study revealed the way the course has, to an extent, been colonised by those who have social resources that normalise participation in higher education and how aspects of learners' identities influence attitudes towards student dropout.

I suggested that the Access to Business course at Inner-London College could do more to target under-represented groups in and that a practical strategy would be to integrate Access awareness raising and normalising activities into existing programmes such as 'Aimhigher'. I also considered how practitioners could improve practice by recognising the importance that identity and social participation plays in learning and suggested practical suggestions for the classroom. Finally I considered possible areas for further research.

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Last, but not least, a particular thanks must go to my Access to Business students for their patience and forbearance. Without them the research project would not have been possible.

Chapter One

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research project. I will first explain what interested me about carrying out a systematic enquiry into the functioning of an Access course located in an inner-city college of further education. Although my study focuses on one particular course I believe that it will have wider implications for policy and practice. I will then briefly outline the development of Access programmes generally and the Access course that is the subject of this study, and set this in the context of the discourse on widening participation. I then want to describe the research setting. The chapter goes on to describe the phenomenon that prompted my research, how this developed into research questions for the Initial Study and how the Initial Study led to a refocusing of my investigation and a reformulation of the research questions. The chapter will end with an outline of the content of subsequent chapters.

This research project has arisen out of my commitment to 'second-chance' education in general and the Access movement in particular. As someone who was labelled a failure at school I was able to rebuild my learner identity through an initial engagement with further education. At school I was in the bottom stream whereas at college I studied in an environment where difference according to ability was eliminated and I felt I thrived in that environment. My positive experience of further education encouraged me to study at a higher level that eventually led to teachers' training college and a

career in further education. I have been teaching at my present place of employment, Inner-London College¹ for almost my entire teaching career. I have taught a range of business studies subjects at different levels in my time at the college but when the opportunity came to become involved in the new Access to Business course I jumped at the chance.

I was attracted to the idea of working on this particular programme for a number of reasons. Firstly, the Access discourse of providing opportunities to those who had 'missed out' at school accorded with my own experience of secondary education and my sense of social justice. Secondly, the awarding body that validates the Access programme (the local Open College Network) provides a framework within which course teams can develop their own curriculum. This meant I was, in collaboration with colleagues, able to develop my own programme of study and teaching materials. This was at a time when competence based education and training (CBET) was reshaping other courses I taught on that I felt was pedagogically flawed (Hyland, 1994). As a consequence, I was glad to be involved in a programme that allowed for a less reductive approach to educational practice. Finally, I was also attracted to a programme of study that gave me the opportunity to work with older students who I believed would be motivated and committed to their studies because they had a clear aim, i.e. entry to university education. I have now been involved with the course in various capacities for over fifteen years. As well as teaching a number of subjects I have also tutored students on the

¹ I have changed the name of the College to protect anonymity

course and I continue to share the role of coordinating the programme as a whole.

Commitment to a programme of study means something more than the everyday practicalities of teaching and learning. Commitment is demonstrated through reflecting on practice, on analysing and evaluating the process and product of a particular activity. I believe that my experience of the Access to Business course has given me the insight to carry out research that can make a contribution to improving practice for the whole programme. I also believe there are lessons to be learnt for the Access movement as a whole and the research has produced findings that will make a contribution to the debate on widening participation. On a personal level I know that having undertaken this research has changed me as a person and has helped me to gain a fresh perspective on educational practice. In particular, it has helped me to appreciate the centrality of identity and social interaction to an understanding of how students learn and progress in an educational setting. I now want to briefly examine the development of the Access movement and its relationship with the policy on widening participation in higher education in order to locate my research within a wider context.

Background and context

Before the end of the 1970s adult learners without formal qualifications had to rely on informal arrangements or taking 'A' levels if they were to gain entry into higher education. This was seen as inefficient and unfair because entry to higher education was down to luck, being in the right place at the right time

and 'A' levels were seen by educators as unsuitable for adults because the qualification paid insufficient attention to study skills and was inappropriate for those who had been away from formal education for a number of years (West, 1996). It was at this time that local initiatives started to emerge to address this perceived problem. Kirton (1999) argues that the Access movement originated in the context of practice by practitioners located in post-compulsory settings where provision was self-created from below by what is described as 'pockets of activity' (Parry, 1996:13). It was then adopted by the Government as a way of responding to the frustration and disaffection experienced by inner city black youth which had earlier been addressed in the White Paper, 'The West Indian Community' (Home Office, 1977). Rimington (1992) saw the adoption of Access courses at this time as a government policy initiative to create successful black role models for the next generation to identify with. However, in contrast to this interpretation, Benn and Fieldhouse (1991) argue that the Government saw it as a way of creating a black middle class that could control communities from the inside. An alternative view saw this interest in Access courses by the Department of Education and Science (DES) as a means of retaining a foothold in adult education and training where the Manpower Services Commission (answerable to the Secretary of State for Employment) was increasingly becoming involved. (Lieven, 1989).

Whatever the motives, the practical outcome was that a DES press release and Letter of Invitation dated August 2nd 1978 (DES, 1978) invited eight inner-city local education authorities to develop and pilot Special Courses in

Preparation for Entry to Higher Education (later, known as 'Access Courses'). These courses would initially be designed to cater mainly, but not exclusively, for members of ethnic minority communities wishing to enter the teaching profession and later for occupations such as social work, nursing, youth and community work. The pilot project lasted four years and during that time its progress was carefully monitored and evaluated resulting in a report that found that ex-access students performed better than 'A' level students and were from socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds that were under-represented in higher education (Millens, 1984). In the following year a report was published that criticised Access courses for lacking academic rigour (DES, 1985) but this in turn was rejected by later research (Bourner and Hamed, 1987). However, a further attack on standards by HMI had the effect of transforming 'pockets of activity' (Parry, 1996:13) 'into something more like a self-conscious Access movement' (Kirtton, 1999:194) and in 1986 the Forum for Access Studies was formed to advance Access courses. The Council for National Academic Awards and the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals established a committee to license the validating bodies that were responsible for courses and in 1987 Access courses were formally recognised as an established route into HE, (DES, 1987). By 1989 there were around 400 Access courses in 50 local education authorities (Smithers & Robinson, 1989).

During the period of expansion in the early 1990s Inner-London College sought approval to run an Access to Business course and this was granted. The college accepted its first intake of students onto this course in the

September of 1992. The programme began as a two-pathway model. Students were recruited into one or other of the pathways depending on whether they wanted to only study business or whether they wanted to study the subject with French or Italian. Students could only study French or Italian if they were sufficiently competent in the language prior to enrolment and this normally meant that they would be French or Italian or members of those countries Diaspora. After the programme had been running a few years demand for the 'with languages' pathway fell away and students were recruited onto a 'business only' programme with students requiring additional English language support being enrolled into one class and the remainder recruited into the other class.

Widening participation

The establishment of Access as a 'third way' (together with vocational and academic qualifications) into higher education coincided with, in the early 1990s, concerns centring on economic and social cohesion that led to policy initiatives that would impact on further and higher education. In 1994 the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) set up a widening participation committee chaired by Helena Kennedy. In the committee's report (FEFC, 1997) it was argued that it was not sufficient just to increase the number of students but that participation in further education should be widened by reaching out to those groups in society that had been traditionally under represented. The issue of widening participation in higher education was also being addressed at this time. The Dearing report (DfEE, 1997) argued that the UK should plan to match the participation rates of other advanced nations

and that there should be a commitment to widen participation by targeting underrepresented groups. In 2002 the Department for Education and Skills reiterated its commitment to widening participation in higher education and again identified the need to target groups with low representation (DfES 2003). In the context of this need to widen participation, Access policy discourse precisely accords with this aim:

Access to Higher Education programmes respond to the call for wider participation in higher education, and assume the need for, and desirability of, increased participation by those groups, which are currently under-represented in higher education (QAA, 2007).

And Access courses are:

Specially designed to prepare mature students for entry into HE and provide the underpinning knowledge and skills needed to progress to a degree or diploma course at a university or college. Access programmes are often targeted at those groups identified as under-represented in HE, in particular, disabled learners, the unemployed, women returners, minority ethnic groups and those from socio-economic group backgrounds where entry to HE is not traditional. (UCAS, 2007).

However, despite the rhetoric of widening participation and the reality of a doubling of social class V ('unskilled' using the Registrar General's scale of social class and socio-economic groups) participation since 1991/2 the *proportion* of students from the poorer classes has stubbornly remained the same (DfES, 2003). Similarly, whilst adult participation in learning has increased, the expansion in opportunity is distributed towards those that are educationally privileged, to the young, and to people with jobs (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2001). This is not to suggest that Access courses are necessarily failing in their aim to attract students from underrepresented groups. Since

the number of students doing Access has not increased in recent years (DfES, 2003) it might be the case that the Access movement is too small to make an impact on differential access to higher education. Having set the context for my research I now want to outline the research setting.

Research setting

Inner-London College is a medium sized general further education college located on five sites in an inner-city setting. The college was established in 1903 and provides around 350 full and part-time education and training courses to over 8000 students each year. The geographical area the college serves is characterised by huge contrasts of wealth and opportunity, juxtaposed with areas of social and economic disadvantage, including large numbers of the homeless and resident asylum seekers. In the immediate area of the college two thirds of the local authority wards are classified as having levels of deprivation higher than the national average. The college site where the Access to Business course is located resides in a ward that falls into the 10% most deprived wards in the country. In the college as a whole, in the academic year 2005/6, nearly 70% of students were over nineteen years of age. In terms of ethnicity the largest groups represented in this age group were White British 32%, Black African 12%, Black Caribbean 5%, Arab 5% and Bangladeshi 2%. 45% of all students speak English as an additional language. The main other first languages are Arabic, Bangladeshi/Bengali, Somali, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Farsi/Persian, Kurdish and Polish. Diversity in the wider College community is reflected in the college's Access provision, although individual courses, based on

particular areas of the curriculum, reveal different patterns of participation with respect to diversity. This provision is located in different faculties on different sites and each individual course is managed and run independently of each other.

The Access to Business course recruits students from within the College's immediate locale but also from a wider geographical area. Around forty students are recruited every academic year and there is an expectation that anything from twenty-six to thirty-two will gain an Access certificate and progress to university entrance. All in possession of a certificate are offered places and most, if not all, gain entry to local 'new universities'. Just as the College student cohort as a whole and the College's Access students can be characterised as diverse so can the students recruited every year on the Access to Business programme. Of course, the exact composition of any year's intake will differ as will the exact nature of that diversity. My main research focus is on the students we recruited in the 2005/6 academic year. In this year we enrolled thirty-nine students which were divided into two classes, Class 'A' and Class 'B'. During the recruitment process all our students written English is assessed and this determines which class they join. Where students are assessed as requiring additional English support they will join Class B. All other students are enrolled into Class A. As a consequence of this policy, most students in Class A will have been born in the United Kingdom, had experience of British secondary education and/or have spent a number of years in this country. Most Class B students are born in countries other than the United Kingdom and been educated abroad.

I have suggested that the focus of my research, the two Access to Business classes can be characterised as diverse. I want to illustrate this by drawing on data from the College's enrolment form and student questionnaire (see appendix 2) I gave out in the early part of the course to build up student profiles of the two classes. In Class A eleven students were born in Britain, of whom eight were the children of first generation immigrants. Their parents came from the Caribbean, Africa and the Indian sub-continent. The remaining nine students were born in African countries and as far a-field as Japan and Brazil but had spent a number of years in this country. In terms of ethnicity² ten identified themselves on the enrolment form as Black/British-African, three as Black/British-Caribbean, three as White-Other, two as Asian/British–Pakistani, one as Asian/British–Indian and one as Asian/British-Indian. Eleven of the students were aged 19-21, four, 22-24 and five were aged 25 or over. All the students in the class had family and/or friends who had been to university.

In Class B four students were born in Britain, two each from Lithuania, Portugal, Germany and France and one student each from Turkey, Spain, Holland, Afghanistan, Brazil, Angola and Sierra Leone. In terms of ethnicity five identified themselves on the enrolment form as White-Other, five as Black/British-African, two each as Black/British-Caribbean, Asian/British-Other and Mixed-White/Black African. One student identified herself as Asian/British Bangladeshi and the remaining three students failed to indicate their ethnicity on the enrolment form. Eight were aged 19-21, five, 22-24 and

² Based on Inner-London College's equal opportunities monitoring question

six aged 25 or over. As with the other class, all the students had family and/or friends who had been to university. The students in this class had English as their second language and could be termed loosely as economic migrants.

I draw on the data supplied by the students themselves but choice of ethnic label is governed by the choices given to them by the College enrolment form. There is an argument for students choosing their own label and the labels that identify ethnicity change over time. However, what isn't in doubt is that the data collected shows that both classes share a common characteristic of diversity. The selection process does lead to each class having a particular identity but there are a number of factors that are common to both groups. Students come from different countries or are the children of first generation immigrants. Both classes are culturally and ethnically diverse and provide an educational space where students of different ages are able to interact. All of the students have family members who have been to university or know friends who have experience of higher education.

Diversity and commonality provide a rich research setting where students' experiences can be investigated. I hope to show how these can provide insights that will provide the opportunity to improve practice and enhance the student experience as they progress from further to higher education.

Research questions

The research questions have been refined over the course of the study. The research can be seen as having two phases. The first phase took the form of an Initial Study. The rationale for this part of my research was the need to explore something I had noticed over the years of my involvement with the course. I referred earlier to the way the course cohort was divided into two classes. One class comprised students mainly born and/or educated in Britain and the other was made up of students mainly born and educated in other countries. What I had noticed was a pattern of differential performance between the classes with Class B, comprising students born overseas, performing more effectively. I wanted to carry out a study that could explore this phenomenon. The Initial Study also acted as a pilot for the Main Study where I was able to formulate a theoretical framework, draw up and investigate research questions and analyse findings. The second phase, the main study, was informed by the Initial Study and developed the study further.

For the Initial Study I posited that there were two characteristics of performance that seemed to relate to the composition of the two classes:

1. The observation that more students withdraw from Class A than Class B in absolute terms and in proportion to those enrolled.
2. There is a perception that Class B present as a more cohesive group. Class B students attend better and are more likely to meet deadlines.

However, I argued that the central issue was that a number of students had been lost to the college and to higher education, at least for the time being. Each one had aspirations to enter higher education and these aspirations had been thwarted. As a consequence of this observation I formulated two guiding research questions:

1. Why do students who have enrolled onto an Access to Business course with the aim of gaining entry into higher education withdraw before fulfilling that goal?
2. What are the barriers to persistence that students face?

At the end of the first phase of my research I considered how the Initial Study could be progressed and decided that it would be necessary to extend the research. I wanted the research to be original and acknowledge more the diverse nature of the student intake and how their experiences can gain an insight into how an Access class functions. The Main Study also provided me with an opportunity to investigate how practice could be improved in the context of a diverse setting. I also felt I should set out to discover the extent to which the Access discourse on widening participation is reflected in practice. I set myself two tasks for the Main Study:

1. To investigate the learning experiences of students from diverse backgrounds;
2. To establish the extent to which the Access policy discourse of widening participation is reflected in the students recruited to the Access to Business course.

To achieve this I formulated the following key question and sub-questions:

How do students from diverse backgrounds experience learning on an Inner-City Access course?

Sub-questions:

1. Does the Access to Business course at Inner-London College attract students from groups under-represented in higher education?
2. How does a classroom setting characterised as diverse affect the formation and functioning of learning communities?
3. What are the attitudes towards student dropout?

Having introduced the research project in this chapter I now want to outline the content of the chapters that follow.

Subsequent chapters

In Chapter Two I review the literature on a number of interrelated topics I felt were relevant to my research. The review allowed me to find out what others have said about my research interest and to develop a theoretical framework. A common theme running through much of the review is that of identity. Identity shapes action in social settings and I explore issues of structure, agency and diversity. The review looks in particular at the way a combination of habitus and capital structures identity and practice (Bourdieu, 1984) and how the classroom can be theorised as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) where identity influences action and interaction

shapes identity. Diversity is about the way difference is categorised and there is evidence that this affects the way groups engage and participate in practice (e.g. Quintrell & Westwood, 1994; Ledwith *et al*, 1998). The review also gives me the opportunity to examine how practice in the classroom can be improved through recognising the centrality that social interaction has on learning (Wenger, 1998); how to support learning in diverse settings (Shore *et al.*, 1993; hooks, 1994; Ross-Gordon 1993) and what factors cause students to dropout before completion (e.g. Tinto, 1975).

Chapter Three explores the issues surrounding methodology. Methodology is about the whole research process and the assumptions that underpin the research approach. I argue that although a researcher's world view about what constitutes knowledge and how it is formed plays a part in the research approach it is the problem in context that can determine how the investigation is to be addressed: 'The approach adopted... will depend on the nature of the enquiry and the type of information required' (Bell, 1993:6). I theorise the Access to Business programme as a 'bounded system' (Smith, 1978) and employ a qualitative case study approach to the research problem where I allow the respondents' voices, in the main, the Access students to be heard.

Chapter Four outlines the methods of data collection I employed for the Initial and Main studies. I present quantitative data to argue that the two classes (Class A and Class B) that make up the Access to Business programme exhibit different levels of performance. I use this information to justify treating each class as a separate research site for the purposes of data collection and

analysis. For the Initial Study I describe the context and experience of conducting interviews with two tutors and two focus groups made up of students from the 2004/5 cohort of students. In particular, I reflect on my reservation associated with conducting a focus group with students whose first language is not English. For the Main Study I describe the process of selecting students for interview, organising and conducting the interviews. I also reflect on various issues associated with my role as a teacher/researcher in the context of interviewee selection and the interview themselves. The chapter ends with an explanation of and justification for the way I analysed the data collected.

Chapter Five analyses the data collected. The chapter draws principally on the data I collected from the two sets of student interviews I conducted for the Main Study with a sample of students from the 2005/6 cohort. It also uses data I collected from the two Access tutors I interviewed as part of the Initial Study. The chapter begins with an analysis of students' backgrounds and an exploration of students' reasons for re-engaging with education. I then analyse students' experiences of the Access to Business course. The chapter goes on to examine attitudes towards student dropout and then looks at the issue of the course team's recruitment policy and its impact on shaping learning communities. The chapter concludes with a summary of the similarities and differences between the two Access to Business classes and outlines issues that have emerged from the data analysed.

Chapter Six evaluates the data analysed in the previous chapter. I draw on the literature review and theoretical framework to assess the contribution the analysis may make to improving Access policy and practice. In this chapter I attempt to offer an insight into the extent to which the Access to Business programme at Inner-London College is targeting under-represented groups in the context of the government's policy of widening participation in higher education. I also examine the experiences of Access students and explore the effect that identity and diversity has on the formation and functioning of learning communities. The chapter continues with an evaluation of attitudes towards student dropout before examining the effect that recruitment practice has on shaping learning communities. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings

Chapter Seven reaches a number of conclusions. I reflect on my experiences of conducting the research and look at possible weaknesses in the research. I consider the original features of the study and its contribution towards knowledge. I then suggest ways in which practice could be improved in the light of the findings. The chapter ends with suggestions for further research.

Conclusion

Research questions help to set the agenda for investigating phenomena. However, research can take on a life of its own and while attempting to answer one set of questions, data emerges that provides an insight and helps to answer questions not originally posited or raise issues that require further research. Research is usually messy with twists and turns that the researcher

has not contemplated. However, all journeys need a beginning and the research questions have provided a route sheet that enabled me to start that journey. Having outlined the reasons for carrying out the research, the educational setting, context, research problem and questions, I now want to examine what others have said about the issues that concern me.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

I conducted a review of the literature for a number of reasons. I wanted to discover what other research has revealed about a number of interrelated topics, develop a theoretical framework within which to locate my research, set the stage for my study, contribute towards refining the research problem and questions and finally to contribute towards the analysis and evaluation of my findings. I developed the literature review over the period of the research project. The research questions help to direct the review and the review was used to reformulate the research questions.

The original intention of my research was to explore the issues of student dropout. I then decided to extend the study for a combination of factors. One factor was a realisation that there had already been extensive research into the phenomenon (for example see Tinto, 1975, 1993; Gooderham, 1994; McGivney, 1996; MacDonald, Karkalas and Mackenzie, 1996) and I was not convinced that limiting my research to this phenomenon would necessarily be the best use of the time and effort the research would take. I also realised that there were practical problems with researching dropout where the intention was to include perspectives from withdrawn students. This was because in the Initial Study I was unable to contact any of the students that had dropped out (see p.76). Another factor was that my position as a

teacher/researcher on a course that attracted students from diverse backgrounds afforded me the opportunity to research wider issues. After reading the literature I realised that the particular context of my research raised the possibility of addressing issues not covered widely in the literature.

My research focuses on learning about students' experiences of participating on an Access to Higher Education programme in an inner-city college of further education where the backgrounds of the learners are diverse. This gave me the opportunity to hear these students' voices about what the experience was like for them as they negotiated their way through the Access course. Before I could 'hear' these voices I needed to work out a theoretical framework to set boundaries for the research and develop themes that I could use to inform the interview guides and subsequent analysis and evaluation of the findings. I want to use this chapter to outline the literature I reviewed and discuss its relevance in the context of the research questions and the research I carried out. The chapter begins with an examination of student dropout. I then explore the issue of widening participation and the role of Access courses in attracting under-represented groups into higher education. I then go on to explain the reasons for developing the review further by focusing on issues that I feel are particularly relevant to researching student groups that are characterised as diverse.

Student dropout

The catalyst for my research was the differential performance of the two Access to Business classes. This was what made me decide to carry out the

research project from the outset. One particular indicator of performance is retention. Class B consistently outperforms Class A in this regard (see p.72). I therefore decided to look at the reasons why students withdrew early from post-compulsory settings and this was the focus of my research for the Initial Study. A search of the literature shows that one needs to turn to the United States to find the origins of attempts to understand why students leave their courses early. Spady (1970, 1971), drawing on Durkheim's (1961) theory of suicide, developed a descriptive theory of dropout behaviour. This suggests that students would be more likely to drop out if their values and orientations did not match those of other students (normative integration) and if there was insufficient personal interaction with other students (structural integration). However, Tinto (1975) suggests that since colleges have social *and* academic systems 'it is important to distinguish between normative and structural integration in the academic domain of the college from that of the social domain of the college' (Tinto, 1975:92). By acknowledging the existence of social and academic domains, it is suggested, that it is possible to be integrated into one and not the other, thus affecting persistence. In addition an over emphasis on integration in one domain could affect integration in the other, again jeopardising course continuation. In developing a theoretical model of dropout from college, it is argued, that it is necessary to build into the model sets of individual characteristics and dispositions relevant to educational persistence. One must include background characteristics (social status, schooling, neighbourhood), individual attributes (gender, ethnicity, ability), and individual motivations and expectations. Educational expectations include level and intensity, referred to in the model as goal

commitment, that is, how much the student wants to achieve the qualification embarked on. The assumption behind goal commitment is that the less a student is committed to a particular goal the more likely he/she will withdraw. In the model 'institutional commitment' refers to how much the student wants to attend a particular institution or type of institution. Where the particular institution attended, for example, is an integral part of future plans, this will increase institutional commitment. Similarly, where considerable financial and time resources have been devoted to a particular study this will similarly increase institutional commitment and in both examples reduce the tendency for students to drop out.

Having looked at the specification of the conditions under which dropout occurs (academic and social mal-integration), individual characteristics (educational and institutional commitments) it is now possible to turn to the dropout process itself. According to Tinto:

The process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person's experiences in those systems (as measured by his normative and structural integration) continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or varying forms of dropout (Tinto, 1975:95).

Students enter the college with their own personal attributes (gender, ethnicity, ability), previous experiences (qualifications, social attainments) and diverse family backgrounds (social class, values and expectations). The background characteristics and individual attributes influence initial goal and institutional commitments. A student's normative and structural integration

into the college's social and academic systems leads to new levels of commitment:

In the final analysis, it is the interplay between the individual's commitment to the goal of college completion and his commitment to the institution that determines whether or not the individual decides to dropout from college (Tinto, 1975:96).

Tinto's model was based on the experience of traditional students attending campus universities. A number of subsequent studies supported the contention that integration is predictive of student dropout (see Pascarella & Chapman, 1983, Terenzini, Lorang, & Pascarella, 1981). However, research into students found that academic integration has a more indirect effect on dropout than social integration (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983, Pascarella & Wolfe, 1985). Fox (1986) found that amongst disadvantaged students attending a two-year course academic integration influenced social integration but not persistence and amongst students on a two-year community college course Halpin (1990) detected no effect for social integration. One study that attempted to test the model as a whole in a British HE context (Brunsden et al, 2000) indicated that the model did not provide an acceptable description of the data and that an ethnographic approach could more usefully be employed to address the problem of student drop. Draper (2002) voiced a number of criticisms of the model from a methodological perspective. Bean and Metzner (1985) contend that Tinto's model does not explain non-traditional student attrition because they would experience college differently. Their model extends Tinto's model to include environmental variables such as family responsibilities and work that could push students out of college. Although it

is suggested that Tinto's model fails to take into consideration factors that may pertain particularly to non-traditional students, he does recognise external impacts on student dropout:

Though it is recognised that a person may withdraw from college for reasons that have little to do with his interaction within the college systems, it is suggested that those impacts will best be observed through the person's changing evaluations of his commitments to the goal of completion and to the institution in which he is registered (Tinto, 1975:97).

However, in a later model (Tinto, 1993), based on a study of the educational experiences of community college students, 'external commitments' is seen as a specific variable that impacts upon a student's goal and institutional commitments. Other research has also shown the effect that external factors can have on students' decisions to stay or go (for example see Yorke, 1999 and Palmer, 2001). Gooderham (1994) identified external constraints as one perspective that could be used to develop an understanding of adult learners' dropout. External factors (personal, finance, family, childcare) were also given by McGivney (1996) as the cause of early withdrawal by mature students in further and higher education. Personal and family commitments were given as another factor in the decision to withdraw (MacDonald, Karkalas and Mackenzie, 1996). Furthermore, an exploration of the opportunities and constraints that confronted inner-London further education access students found that lack of money, time and child care problems or a combination of all three were cited by six of the seven that left the course early (Reay *et al*, 2002). Martinez (1995) found that financial hardship was the main reason given for student withdrawal. Dearing (DFEE, 1997) suggested that further research was needed into the

potential influence of external factors on non-completion. Callender (1999) identified that lack of funds led to a quarter of respondents to consider withdrawing early and a third to feeling that their financial problems adversely affected their academic performance.

Echoes of Tinto's model can also be found in studies where there has been no attempt to test the model, use the variables identified or employ a model to frame the research. For example, early withdrawal has been linked to an inability to make friends and settle into college life (Martinez and Munday, 1998), not feeling part of the group or institution (Cullen, 1994), poor commitment (Armstrong, 1996), lack of institutional integration and commitment to graduate (Walker, 1999), low level of commitment to the university experience (Mackie, 2001), poor college experience (Medway and Penney, 1994), costs outweighing the benefits and dissatisfaction with the course (MacDonald, Karkalas and Mackenzie, 1996).

The reasons why students withdraw early has been described as complex, multiple and inter-related (Martinez & Munday, 1998). Different students withdraw for different reasons but it is possible to see that there are underlying structural reasons that shape identity and action. As Tinto (1975) argues, agents of socialisation and sources of identity influence individual commitment to programmes of study and the external factors that can get in the way of student engagement are often those associated with social position (Reay *et al*, 2002).

I believe that the study of student dropout is important. If a course is losing students it is the responsibility of those concerned to investigate why it is happening. I took the opportunity in my own research to ask the continuing students and my colleagues why they thought students had left the course early and I present my findings in Chapter Six. Notwithstanding the importance of retention and dropout I decided that I should use the opportunity afforded to me to extend the research and I did this for a number of reasons. Firstly, I realised that any additional research in this area beyond what I had already undertaken and planned for would not necessarily add to the extensive research already carried out (see above for examples). Secondly, I was frustrated by my inability in the Initial Study to contact and interview those students who had withdrawn. I was obliged to draw on the voices of teachers and continuing students and I felt that I would not be able to paint a complete picture without including the voices of the withdrawn students. Thirdly, and most importantly, my position as a teacher/researcher on a course that exhibits such diversity in terms of nationality, ethnicity and range of ages provided me with an excellent opportunity to do more. I was in the privileged position of being able to draw on the experiences of my students and gain an insight into what it was like to be an Access student.

Widening participation and Access

In the previous chapter I referred to the Government's reiterated commitment to widening participation in higher education by targeting groups with low representation (see p.6/7). The White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (2003), acknowledged that Access provided a 'valuable entry route for many

students, particularly those who missed out at 18' (DfES, 2003:71). It noted that there is a clear contrast in the profile of students coming through Access and those coming through other routes. In a project funded by the DfES there was an acknowledgement that Access students present a distinct profile of students that is indicative of its focus on targeting particular groups (QAA, 2004). This suggests that overall the Access movement is fulfilling its mission to target underrepresented groups. However, in one study evidence pointed to Access courses having limited success in recruiting students from particular under-represented groups that Access is designed to attract (Connelly and Chakrabarti, 1999). This study was located in Scotland and points to the possibility of variations in performance in terms of targeting certain underrepresented groups within the Access movement as a whole, although it should be noted that the DfES research (DfES, 2003) would not have included data from Scotland. However, the findings from my study also suggest that the Access to Business course at Inner-London College fails to attract students from particular under-represented groups and I will return to this issue in later chapters.

Diversity, difference and identity

In the previous chapter I described the Access to Business course as diverse (see p.9-11). Characterising the programme as diverse suggests that the students are different. Difference is rooted in the backgrounds of the students, their experiences of family and school, country and culture. How students function will be influenced by their identity and the identities of others they come into contact with. The feeling of identity associated with belonging

to social groups, such as a nation, religion or ethnic group, creates a cultural identity. Cultural identity is a fluid concept with different schools of thought. An essentialist view of culture, for example, posits that the rules, practices and thoughts of a culture shape the collective and individual lives of group members. Furthermore it suggests that national, ethnic and religious culture is fixed and unchanging and that individuals are positioned in a mono-cultural setting that determines their thoughts and actions. This perspective is criticised for ignoring the role that individuals have in forming cultural practices and ignoring the reality of modernity and its impact on the lived experience of individuals. Others argue that in the modern world the reality is that individuals inhabit more than one culture:

We all participate in the keeping up, not to mention the remaking, of a national culture, an ethnic culture, and a religious one, and we probably participate in the culture associated with a region or a city, a particular language community, and a social category such as student or workers, feminists or motorbikers, surfers or punks – the list is endless (Baumann, 1999: 84)

In culturally diverse societies individuals can belong to more than one group and can move between such groups (Campbell, 2000). Social groups shape individual identity but individuals contribute towards creating the culture of the group. When individuals from different cultural backgrounds come together in a common social space such as classroom they can draw on their own cultures to create a new culture and identity within it. The Access class can draw on cultural diversity to form a culture of its own and students can draw on the new culture to shape their own student identity.

Cultural and other forms of identity are not at the forefront of teachers' minds when faced with filling an empty class with students. For teaching staff at the College as soon as an individual walks in the door of the college that individual becomes 'a student'. This label is attached to the person even before interview, and certainly before enrolment. This label is unproblematic and uncomplicated from the College's point of view. It means the various components of the institution know what to 'do' with that person, be it filling out enrolment forms, referring to the student advisor, induction and so on. It is suggested that the notion of 'student' confers on the holder a clear role and identity:

A student is part of an institution. This sense of belonging is important in establishing a sense of identity. It provides a certain status which can be important to us as individuals and in negotiating boundaries with others...being a student provides a boundary against which other demands can be defended. It is a 'serious' role which, although capable of being a challenge to our sense of self and relations with members of family and friends, none the less provides the grounds for affirming a particular identity (Edwards, 1997:129).

This is important for adults whose participation in formal education and training is dependent partially upon their ability to organise their learning, to defend a space-time around other demands (Morrison, 1992). Attaching the label 'student' to an individual does not imply that the College is blind to the other identities and roles that may be part of that student's make up but these are seen only in the context of being set against the primary role of student. This may be criticised as trivialising the 'whole person' and ignoring the reality of students' lived experiences:

Students consistently describe their identities as multifaceted, multisourced and multilayered. The colleges that they attend are more likely than not to define students in much narrower terms. When they do so, they ignore or negate the lived experiences of students, and increase the chances that these students will maintain neither the desire nor the ability to persist (Shaw, 1999:169).

Similarly, it is not possible for teachers to assume that individuals will perceive themselves as 'students' simply because they have enrolled on to a course. In one particular study of mature Access students (Wakeford, 1994) there were varied reactions to being on the programme. For some the process of thinking of themselves as becoming a mature student centred on the notion of undergoing some kind of change of identity. Some saw it as a new way to present themselves to others. Others saw it as a distinct segment of themselves. Not all adopted an identity as a 'student', others rejected the label. Students strategically accepted or rejected the label of student in the face of responses that this identification stimulated in others. Although students subjectively experienced the objective reality of being a student very differently Wakeford's (1994) study found that a mature student culture emerged on the course where mutual support was part of this culture, and part of their identity as a mature student. They had to negotiate their identities by participating in this support culture so that they did not endanger their identities as mature students (Wakeford, 1994). What emerges from this study is that although students will be experiencing the student role differently this is not a barrier to cooperation where difference can be subsumed or subverted for the common good. Difference is not absolute but reveals itself in the production of different approaches and points of view. Although it is

nuanced, difference manifests itself in the ways individuals experience being a student (Wakeford, 1994) and also in the identities of the students.

A key question is how students from diverse social backgrounds experience learning on the Access course. Diversity reveals itself by drawing on socially constructed sources of identity. The concept of identity is important for me because it shapes individual action in a learning community such as a classroom and the way the classroom functions as an entity. This in turn has implications for how effective the classroom is in meeting students' needs. Identity as a concept has changed over time (Hall, 1992) and theorised from within different schools of thought. Sarup (1996) speaks of two views of identity:

The 'traditional' view is that all the dynamics (such as class, gender, 'race') operate simultaneously to produce a coherent, unified, fixed identity. The more recent view is that identity is fabricated, constructed, in process. Identities are fragmented, full of contradictions and ambiguities (Sarup, 1996:14).

As such Identities 'are constantly in the process of change and transformation' (Hall, 1990:4) and thus are never complete. This conception of identity thus allows for the possibility of change, of identity being shaped over time. Identity is about how individuals act and behave in the social world. According to symbolic interactionist theory individuals act towards things according to the meanings they have for them and these meanings are shaped through interaction with others (Blumer, 1969). Within this context Gallacher *et al* (2002) refers to:

The importance of the relationship between the individuals and the social institutions that structure and shape the processes of interaction in which they are involved (Gallacher *et al*, 2002:502).

Colleges have an important constitutive role in forming identity (Kaufman and Feldman, 2004) and students on Access courses are involved in changing their identities (Brine and Waller, 2004). Despite the fluidity of identity in contemporary society certain sources of identity remain important in the discourse on identity and difference:

Identity as a concept and as categories such as class, gender, ethnicity have emerged as salient ways to think about and describe difference because of specific historical and contemporary structures of power and corresponding practices (Dolby, 2000).

Difference is important because the Access to Business course attracts students from diverse backgrounds and I want to explore the impact that this diversity has for the individual student and for the classroom as a whole. Access courses are not separate from students' past or present lives; it is embedded within it; they are 'classed, raced and gendered subjects, people whose biographies are intimately linked to the economic, political and ideological trajectory of their families and communities' (Apple, 1985:5). For women from working-class backgrounds, returning to education challenges their identities as learners, their classed identities and their classed femininities (Brine and Waller (2004). Education induced social class confusions and tensions (Lawler, 1999; Archer *et al*, 2003) mean that progression to university is not one straightforward movement to an unproblematic new learner identity, but is one of risk and reflexivity – contradiction and confusion regarding class identity also.

Campbell (2000) suggests that there is an assumption that coming from a non-mainstream cultural background is a disadvantage. This assumption fails to acknowledge the success of many students from non-traditional mainstream cultural backgrounds and the fact that in contemporary society the ability to move across cultural boundaries is an advantage rather than a disadvantage. Referring to immigrants in Western countries, Campbell states:

Traditional/home cultural values give some...an academic advantage over their mainstream counterparts. This is particularly the case for students whose traditional cultures value respect for authority, hard work and educational achievement (Campbell, 2000:36).

Where this is the case not only can this benefit the individual student but it can also benefit the culture of the class where such attitudes can become that of the group.

Group interaction

The studies I have referred to so far relate to the experiences of particular groups of students. There have also been a number of studies that has looked at the way different groups interact where they share a common educational space. Although there is a suggestion that the 'human contact' element of education is seen as important by home and international (foreign) students (Elsay, 1990) there is research that posits that home and international students do not spontaneously mix and would rather study in monocultural educational settings (Quintrell & Westwood, 1994). Some studies suggest that this lack of cross-cultural interactions is attributed to the

international students' tendency to socialise primarily with their own people (Pederson, 1991; Ward & Kennedy, 1993), other research shows that home students have strong preferences for working in groups with others like themselves (Ledwith *et al*, 1998).

The Access to Business course is a site for students of different ages to share the same space. For older students the high-risk investment involved in returning to education coupled with a poor previous learner identity means a greater fear of academic failure than that experienced by their younger peers (Davies & Williams, 2001). In an empirical study of six further education colleges Brooks (2005) found that students and staff believe there are important differences between students relating in some way to their age and that these differences affected the process of learning. Younger students were associated with less responsible and independent attitudes to learning while older learners were typically perceived as self-motivated and strongly committed to their studies. Many respondents thought that chronological age was less important than work experience; others highlighted life events and domestic transitions. Age composition had a direct impact on the process of learning. Respondents believed that mixed-age learning groups had a positive effect on the learning of the younger students and sometimes on the learning of older students. A small number of students identified disadvantages to learning alongside those of a different age with older students complaining of disruption by younger students, whilst students in this category complained of the older students being slow. However, there was widespread agreement that mixed-age learning groups conferred a number of important benefits to learners.

Habitus, participation and engagement

I have outlined how members of different groups experience engagement differently in post-compulsory settings and how difference influences the interaction between groups. There is also a school of thought that suggests that within particular cultures and groups there is a regularity of practice and that individuals within a particular group will act and behave in the same way. Thus individual action is structured. This idea interests me for two reasons. Firstly, it may help to explain why the Access to Business course appears to attract members of groups for whom participation in higher education is part of a normalised discourse. Secondly, it can offer an insight into what influences individual engagement in educational practice. Parsons (1951) argues that patterns of behaviour are governed by rules that operationalise cultural norms and values. Bourdieu (1984) advances the argument by seeking to explain the regularity of practice by employing three interrelated concepts:

$$[(\text{habitus}) (\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice} \text{ (Bourdieu, 1984: 101)}$$

Habitus, described as 'that system of enduring dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1990:3), is structured into a pattern of behaviour forming 'an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted' (Bourdieu, 1977:95). Habitus is acquired in structured social contexts where these enduring and durable dispositions inculcated from an early age and formed through the influence of individual experience, nationality, class, family and gender (Bourdieu and Passerson, 1977). Although the habitus is structured it allows for the mediation of acquired attitudes and behaviours and for embodied beliefs to be challenged and

rejected. Each person belongs to a group where the habitus is developed and as a consequence an agent's habitus will exhibit elements of the collective: '...each individual system of dispositions may be seen as a *structural variant* of all other group or class habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977: 86). Habitus enables human beings to instinctively know the 'rules of the game'. Within the context of education, on entering an elite university a student from the dominant social class 'encounters a social world of which it is a product, it is like a "fish in water": it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:127). Habitus shapes individuals' perceptions, motivations and actions, the way they experience the social world. As well as habitus being associated with human agents the concept has been applied to institutions. Institutional habitus is more than the culture of an institution, it refers to 'relational issues and priorities, which are deeply embedded, and sub-consciously informing practice' (Thomas, 2002). Where there is a disjunction between student habitus and the habitus of the college this may have an adverse impact upon students' experience and the way they engage in the practices of the college and course. Furthermore, habitus will influence the nature of the engagement in terms of type of institution and course applied for, and more fundamentally, whether or not such engagement will be contemplated in the first place. Gallacher *et al* (2002) found that for young people from manual working-class backgrounds 'colleges were no longer familiar places but remote places where foreigners' and 'folk with green hair' were taught by elderly 'hippies' ' (Gallacher *et al*, 2002). For these respondents the further education college had changed,

whilst once it was an institution that was for them it was now seen as 'other', a space now closed off to them.

Habitus combines with capital (Bourdieu, 1986), the resources an individual has to draw on to function in the social world. Capital is divided into convertible forms of capital: economic capital, cultural capital, symbolic capital and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital refers to monetary resources. In a post-compulsory setting an example would be the extent to which a student has access to financial support thus avoiding the need to work part-time. Whilst Bourdieu (1984: 466) sees economic capital as 'always at the root in the last analysis' he draws on the other notions of capital that have 'currency' in the social world (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital consists of the accumulated resources that arise from family background, social class and educational attainment. According to Bourdieu, there are three forms of cultural capital: embodied capital which consists of what an agent can know and do and which can be increased through education and training. Cultural capital is objectified through the possession of cultural artefacts such as books and paintings; finally this form of capital can be recognised in its institutionalised state as academic qualifications. Symbolic capital refers to the status and recognition that individuals gain through possession of cultural capital. A deficit in this form of capital can be realised in the way people are discriminated against because they lack the qualifications necessary to gain entry to particular institutions and courses. Possession of the right qualifications opens up spaces for learning. Symbolic capital is a source of power. When this is exercised by holders of such power to change the

behaviour of those who possess less they exercise 'symbolic violence'. It is a coercive force that helps to maintain particular ways of thinking and acting, preferred by those who are dominant in society. Social capital refers to all the resources that can be drawn on as a consequence of belonging to a group. Individuals can draw on their connections with others in the community to support themselves in achieving their aims. Social capital can act as a means to re-engage with and support participation in education. Students can draw on the material and emotional support offered by family and friends. However, social capital can also inhibit participation where community support is seen as an alternative to and preferable to engagement in formal institutions (Field & Spence, 2000). Capital is embodied into individuals and incorporated into their identities. Along with habitus, capital can shape agents' possibilities for action in particular situations. It confers on the holders of the various forms of capital the power to influence the way social spaces are structured where the nature of the capital possessed has 'currency' within particular social spaces. In the classroom there is an expectation that the teacher would have power to shape classroom practice. However, it is also the case that students will have differing combinations of capital to influence practice.

The habitus and the various forms of capital combine in a 'field' (Bourdieu, 1984). A field can be seen as a social space in which human action takes place such as an educational institution or classroom. A field can be likened to a game with rules but unlike a game of football the rules are only 'known' by the 'players' at an unconscious level. People's actions within a social

space will be shaped by their habitus. Furthermore their habitus will govern the extent to which they recognise the rules of the game and thus their ability to function effectively in any particular field in the first place. The forms of capital do not have value independent of fields. In the economic sphere money is only of value in a setting where it can be used as a means of exchange. Similarly, other forms of capital have value only within the context of a particular field. For example, certain types of cultural capital will have bargaining power in one setting but not in another. The field does not exist independently of habitus and capital but is structured by them. According to Bourdieu, the field shapes the habitus but the habitus shapes the actions that reproduce the field. A classroom can be seen as a field, or structured social space where the social resources (habitus and capital) held by human agents (teachers and students) combine to equal practice. Where a classroom exhibits different practices it might suggest the classroom can be theorised as comprising a number of fields with different rules being followed by different students or groups of students.

The analysis outlined above suggests that individual action, the way people engage with and in the social world is shaped by individual habitus, the possession of forms of capital activated within a particular field. Possession of the 'right' quantity and quality of social resources (habitus and capital) allows for the possibility of (re)engaging with education. Similarly student practice is governed, or at least, influenced by the quantity and quality of social resources, both embodied and externally sourced, that have value or 'purchase' within the setting of the classroom. There has been criticism of the

way the concept has been used in educational research (Tooley & Darby, 1998) and a suggestion that it has little to offer such research (Nash, 1999). Bourdieu himself has been criticised for ignoring or downplaying the role that agency has in shaping practice although it is argued that this is because critics have misunderstood his work (Harker, 1984). In my view, and in the context of my research, I believe that it offers a powerful mechanism for explaining the way socialising agents open up or close off options for educational engagement and participation.

Learning and social participation

Whilst Bourdieu argues that practices are generated from an underlying social structure of habitus, Wenger sees habitus in his concept of communities of practice as 'an emerging property of interacting practices' (Wenger, 1998: 96). For Wenger, experience gained outside a particular community of practice is important, but it can be modified by that community of practice. Indeed, he argues, 'we engage in different practices in each of the communities of practice to which we belong. We often behave rather differently in each of them, construct different aspects of ourselves, and gain different perspectives' (Wenger 1998: 159). This contrasts with Bourdieu's emphasis on dispositions to act in very similar ways in very different circumstances.

Researching the Access classroom as a social space where members of diverse groups come together to learn has led me to explore the relationship between learning and social participation. Influential in this field is the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Although their theory of learning was developed through research into non-classroom settings, I believe that there are lessons that can be learnt for educational practice in general and for the Access classroom in particular. 'Communities of practice' was originally termed in 1991 (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The authors' theory was developed through an analysis of ethnographic studies on how apprentices learn in different settings. The concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation' is used to characterise learning, broadening the traditional view of apprenticeship from a master/student relationship 'to one of changing participation and identity transformation in a community of practice' (Wenger, 1998:11).

Accordingly, apprentice learning takes place through social interaction with more experienced apprentices and journeymen. Learning is situated and occurs through legitimate peripheral participation. Social practices are legitimate if they are recognised as such by community members and peripheral in the sense that initial engagement will take the form of activities that are other than those undertaken by more experienced members. In a community of practice learning takes place through increasing engagement that can be seen as a trajectory from peripheral to full participation (Lave and Wenger 1991). In a community of practice there is mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. A community of practice is about sustaining sufficient mutual engagement in the collective pursuit of an enterprise to share some significant learning. Communities of practice have boundaries that help to define members and non-members. People participate in multiple communities and can create connections between

them. Belonging to more than one community means that there are opportunities for elements of one practice to be absorbed into another thus opening up new possibilities of meaning and learning. Students on the Access to Business course are encouraged to make connections with the world outside of the course by going to university open days early on in the course. Many have part-time jobs, communities where aspects of practice are embodied and brought into the classroom as a resource to be used by themselves and others. Engagement in practice defines the community. A group of students or class, for example, may constitute a community of practice, multiple communities or none at all depending upon the patterns of engagement. Membership of the community and thus its boundaries can change overtime. By engaging in community practices individuals gain a sense of belonging with the community forming a boundary within which identity can be negotiated. The boundary helps to define the community but it can also act as a barrier by limiting the possibilities for learning by shutting off other points of view and ways of doing things. Where a group of students' function as a learning community individual students gain a sense of belonging. An effective community within the context of that community's practices is one where participation leads to meaningful interaction.

Wenger's (1998) focus on participation moves the analysis on from his work with Lave (Lave and Wenger, 1991). It highlights the role that participation in shared practices plays in learning and the construction of identity. Learning involves meaning making in a social context. Meaning is an experience that involves negotiation, the ability to shape the meanings that matter within a

community of practice. Claiming ownership of a meaning that is widely shared affords power and helps to shape identity. However, the negotiated nature of meaning can act as a barrier to participation where members' suggestions are never used. Where the local economy of meaning yields uneven ownership of meaning, members can become marginalised and unable to learn. This can happen where the production and adoption of meaning is reflected in enduring patterns of engagement that 'fix' participants into producers and adopters of meaning. This analysis points to adopting classroom practices that promote the ownership of meaning. A teacher will look for students gaining ownership of the curriculum where knowledge of the subject moves from a shallow understanding to having personal meaning. Learning communities can be supported through engagement, imagination and alignment (Wenger, 1998). Engagement involves participants in a community of practice contributing interdependently that provides material for building an identity. Activities require mutual engagement, the knowledge students bring with them into the classroom and a setting that allows participants to develop shared practices and a commitment to the enterprise and each other. Imagination allows for new possibilities for action and for the construction of an identity that can contemplate such possibilities. Alignment enables the identity of groups to become part of an individual student's identity.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice theory arose out of empirical studies of how learning takes place in informal settings outside the classroom and this is at the root of much of the criticism. One weakness is

that in contrast to an apprentice joining a pre-existing community of practice, in the context of a particular course, students are founding members:

If there is continuity within such a community over time it lies mainly with the tutor. Students come and go, and one cohort is replaced by another...a community of practice is reconstructed every time an intake changes (Hodkinson *et al*, 2004:9).

The same authors have criticised Wenger's (1998) concept of a community of practice as being too narrow for capturing the full range of interactions found in a learning site (Hodkinson *et al*, 2004). Riel and Polin (2004) suggest that classrooms are not practice-based but task-based communities. Classrooms as communities are organised around specific tasks where members work together for a limited time to produce a product. Others (Hodges, 1998; Walkerdine, 1997) have suggested that the theory ignores the intrinsic power relationships involved in learning; it ignores discourse (Linehan & McCarthy, 2000); participation is often coerced (Lerman, 1998) and that students acquiesce to the social practices rather than helping to create them (Winbourne and Watson, 1998). Others have pointed to the way in which the triadic learning relationship of old-timer, established community member, and newcomer does not easily fit the classroom situation where the social roles are divided into teacher and student (Adler 1998; Lerman 1998). Notwithstanding the criticism of applying the theory to the classroom I want to argue that there are ideas arising out of community of practice theory that are applicable to the way the Access to Business classroom functions as a learning community. Theorising the classroom as a community of practice emphasises the importance that participation through interaction plays in learning and the construction of identity. An effective classroom is one where

students gain a sense of belonging and can identify with and align themselves to practices that accord with the discourse and practices of the Access programme.

Diversity, inclusive learning and power

I have described the Access to Business course as diverse in terms of nationality, ethnicity and age. Conferring the identity 'student' to all the individuals on the course can negate their lived experiences (Shaw, 1999), diminishing their identity, ignoring diversity and difference. My research has shown how classroom diversity can be drawn on as a resource to support learning and enhance the student experience. Students, who see their lived experience as having value in the learning community, are more likely to identify themselves with and align themselves to community practice as they themselves are helping to form it. Diversity can be addressed through inclusion. 'Inclusion in FE (further education) centres on the concept of 'inclusive learning'' (Rustemier, 1999). Inclusive learning is about matching college provision to the students' requirements and 'this match or fit can best be brought about by understanding more about how students learn' (FEFC, 1996:26).

In the context of diversity, an inclusive learning environment is one where diversity is reflected in learning activities and pedagogy, attending to the contexts in which learners live and work and reflect the changing needs of an increasingly diverse society. At a practical level appropriate materials and methods need to be chosen that address the characteristics of learning group

members (Tisdell, 1995). The understanding that all groups, including those that are dominant, have a culture or ethnicity must form the basis for the curriculum (Shore et al., 1993). The knowledge base of all groups needs to be represented in the curriculum (hooks, 1994). Although "many groups share in the subordinate social status and selective discrimination that 'minorities' often implies, each cultural group has its own history, values, and customs" (Ross-Gordon 1993:53), and each must be considered in choosing resources and learning activities.

Working towards the goal of creating an inclusive learning environment may give rise to some issues, especially those related to power and control. At the most basic level is the traditional - but unequal - power relations that exist between learners and teachers. In conventional educational settings, teachers and learners have expectations about their roles; the teacher is seen as the source of knowledge and consequently is ascribed power; the learner is perceived as the receiver of the teacher's knowledge, sometimes described as an empty vessel waiting to be filled. However, inclusive learning environments work to "dismantle ways of operating...that unnecessarily privilege teachers' formal knowledge and experience" (Shore *et al.*, 1993:12), and this power shift can be unsettling for both teachers and learners. Educators need to consider how they can create environments that address "issues of power that are inherent in cultural diversity, whether that diversity is based on nationality, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability or some other factor" (Merriam, 1993:58).

Power relations between and among learners are also likely to change as the environment becomes more inclusive. Groups of learners or individuals who may have felt silenced previously will feel freer to become part of the discussions and to challenge existing truths and biases. As differences are recognised and more voices are heard, the notion that a learning setting should be a "safe harmonious place" will be tested (hooks, 1994:30). Thus inclusiveness can change existing structures of relationships in a learning community and create challenges that may need to be addressed by teachers and learners alike. A focus on the centrality of participation to learning and issues related to inclusiveness in diverse settings points to the way that practitioners can improve practice in the classroom. Practice is effective in the Access classroom where student engagement in that practice leads to successful completion and access to higher education.

Conclusion

The literature review has enabled me to identify a number of themes that have been used to develop the theoretical framework for the study. First and foremost is the concept of identity. Identity is important because it shapes action in social settings. The Access to Business course attracts students from diverse backgrounds. Diversity is manifested in difference through socially constructed sources of identity. In this sense identity is structured but students are in the 'business' of changing their identities (Brine and Waller, 2004), and colleges have an important constitutive role in forming identity (Kaufman and Feldman, 2004). Identity also pervades other aspects of the framework.

A second strand of the framework is that of habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and how these concepts are activated in social spaces. Identity is structured by dispositions inculcated at an early age by agents of socialisation. Forms of capital become resources that can be drawn on and combined with habitus, form and inform practice. These resources are embodied in social actors and not only shape practice but also allow for the possibility of engagement in practice.

The third strand in the framework is the concept of communities of practice. Learning is associated with active participation in the practices of social communities and the construction of identities in relation to these communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998). The Access to Business course can be seen as either a single community of practice or as several communities of practice. The nature of student participation in the community of practice will impact upon student success.

The final part of the framework is the relationship between commitment modified by external constraints and student dropout. Commitment is continuously modified during the course according to experiences in the academic and social systems and these experiences are manifested in levels of integration in those systems. External factors can affect integration and thus the commitment to remain on the course (for example, see Tinto, 1975).

The literature review has provided me with the opportunity to explore identity and diversity. Identity influences the decision to engage with education and shapes the experience of participation. The review has enabled me to learn about what others have written about student experience and has provided me with a theoretical framework within which my research can be located. I will now turn to a discussion on the research process itself and the underlying assumption on which it is based.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Introduction

A review of the literature enabled me to gain an insight into what others have written about identity and interaction in particular educational settings. It also contributed towards the formulation of a theoretical framework to provide a boundary for the research effort and within which the research can be located. The research questions and theoretical framework provide the background and context for the investigation and a setting against which I can explore questions of methodology. Methodology is concerned with the entire process of research and the underlying assumptions on which it is based. Within the context of an applied discipline such as education, research is used to understand, inform and improve practice. Research arises out of the need to carry out an investigation into a phenomenon or phenomena where it is felt that research will lead to better understanding and the potential for an improvement in practice. Over the years of my involvement with the Access to Business programme I came to realise that my perception of difference between the two groups was worthy of investigation and, once I had embarked on the research, provide an educational setting where the research could incorporate wider issues associated with diversity and learning through participation.

The chapter will begin by examining the assumptions surrounding my research design. Issues associated with qualitative research will also be dealt with in this section. I will then discuss ethical matters relating to the collection and dissemination of qualitative research. The chapter will end with an examination of the theoretical and practical aspects of the data collection techniques I employed.

Research design

Any investigation or systematic enquiry requires a research design that will guide the enquiry. What the particular research design will be is determined by 'how the problem is shaped, by the questions it raises, and by the type of end product desired' (Merriam, 1988: 6). Underpinning these considerations is an understanding that research methods are more than a technical exercise:

Research is concerned with understanding the world and that this is informed by how we view our world(s), what we take understanding to be, and what we see as the purposes of understanding (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000:3).

Thus ontological assumptions give rise to epistemological assumptions leading to methodological considerations and onto the methods that may be employed to collect, analyse and evaluate data. It is suggested that a researcher's perspective will have profound consequences:

The choice of problem, the formulation of questions to be answered, the characterisation of pupils and teachers, methodological concerns, the kind of data sought and their mode of treatment – all will be influenced or determined by the viewpoint held (Cohen & Manion, 1986:9).

This suggests to me that a research community is divided into separate camps where different research 'beings' hold competing worldviews. However, I would rather argue for a position where the research problem is and of itself governs the approach to be taken by the researcher. Bell (1993) puts it this way:

Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses and each is particularly suitable for a particular context. The approach adopted and the methods of data collection selected will depend on the nature of the enquiry and the type of information required (Bell, 1993:6).

and:

When you have decided on a topic, refined it and specified objectives, you will be in a position to consider how to collect the evidence you require. The initial question is not 'Which methodology?' but 'What do I need to know and why? Only then do you ask 'What is the best way to collect information? And 'When I have this information, what shall I do with it?' (Bell, 1993:63).

From this perspective my research has developed from the particular position I find myself in relation to the research setting. My role as a teacher/researcher wishing to explore the functioning of a particular Access course that I am intimately involved with closes off some options. However, it also provides an ideal opportunity to conduct a particular kind of research, one that is based on gaining an understanding of what it is like to be an Access student from the students' perspective.

Case study

I have suggested that my position as a teacher/researcher and my desire to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of a particular cohort of

students has determined the nature of the enquiry. My position and the nature of the research setting lend itself to conducting a case study. The defining factor that I use to justify this approach is the fact that the Access to Business course can be seen as a 'bounded system' (Smith, 1978) and as such can be seen as a specific phenomenon to be studied. A case study is the study of an 'instance in action' (Adelman *et al*, 1980). The context of case study research is unique and dynamic and therefore:

Case studies investigate and report the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships and other factors in a unique instance (Cohen and Manion and Morrison, 2000:181).

Researchers categorise case studies in a number of different ways. Merriam (1988), for example, identifies case studies in three ways: descriptive case studies provide an account in detail of a particular occurrence, interpretive case studies use thick description to support or refute a particular theoretical position taken prior to the collection of data, and evaluative case studies incorporate description, explanation and judgement. Yin (1989) sees this research approach as either being exploratory where a study or research question needs to be piloted, and descriptive where narrative accounts are compiled or explanatory where the case study is used to test theory. In reviewing the different types of case study it is important not to get too tied up in the labels that have been used to identify the various methods. Merriam (1988), for example, recognises that, although case studies may be described as either being descriptive, interpretive or evaluative, 'While some case studies are purely descriptive, many more are a combination of description and interpretation or description and evaluation' (Merriam, 1988:29). Case studies can employ quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods. Having

discussed case study I now want to discuss the rationale for the nature of the qualitative research I conducted.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research involves studying things:

In their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Although the research conducted is inductive, moving from observation to theory rather than vice-versa (deductive) it did not begin in a vacuum. As I have noted elsewhere in this study I had observed differential performance in the two Access classes I taught and it sparked an idea in my mind as to why this might be. As has been noted, interpretive research begins with an 'organising image of the phenomenon under study' and 'the selection of facts and the searching for order among them is guided by some prior notions or theories about the nature of the social phenomenon under study' (Merriam, 1988, citing Riley 1963:5-6).

At the heart of this research is a reliance on individuals' definition of a situation. In the context of a qualitative interview the interviewee is relying on the respondent's reaction and responses through dialogue. The researcher cannot see inside the person's head and must rely on what is being said. A respondent may be falsely conscious or simply falsify information. Respondents maybe asked for information that has a particular meaning for them, one that makes it difficult for interviewees to reveal what they are really thinking. In the context of my research a stark example was the situation

where a number of respondents had suffered through civil war (see Joan, Frederic and Zakia's profiles, appendix 3) and this affected the way they responded to questions about experiences in their past. Another criticism is the effect that the research method itself has on the responses. This is particularly relevant to my position as a teacher/researcher where respondents maybe modifying their responses because, as their teacher, I am asking the questions. Related to this is the effect that the research process itself impacts upon those researched. Quantitative data on retention, achievement and success showed an improvement in performance for the student cohort subjected to the research process (see p.72). It is possible that the extra attention paid overall to the particular cohort through the research process itself inadvertently produced the 'Hawthorne effect' (Landsberger, 1958) where people researched change their behaviour as a consequence of the research process with, as it happens, positive results for the cohort as a whole.

Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) refer to a number of other criticisms of qualitative approaches. The 'Halo' effect refers to the bias that prior knowledge about, for example, participants may bring to the selection of data to be collected. This was particularly relevant for me where I felt I had to take into consideration, among other factors, the confidence I could have about the useful data I could collect from a number of the second-language speakers. I formed opinions about students' linguistic competence through my involvement with them in the classroom. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) refer to the implicit conservatism of the interpretive methodology where the

perspective of the participants is accepted and the difficulty associated with concentrating on the familiar where the researcher's closeness to the subject can lead to the neglect of certain aspects of the situation. I believe I was guilty of this, particularly in the early stages of my research, where I failed to appreciate the opportunities that issues of diversity had for enquiry. Working in a multi-cultural setting for so many years blinded me to the circumstances I found myself in. The open-endedness and diversity of the situation can lead to focusing too much on difference and the downplaying of similarities. Micro-level research can lead to the neglect of wider social contexts and constraints. Similarly, how can such research be generalised and replicated where the enquiry is localised and unique? A number of these criticisms can be countered by arguing that the criticism is coming from a viewpoint that fails to acknowledge the usefulness of such research and others can be countered by developing research practices that address the concerns raised. Whatever the criticisms it cannot be denied that qualitative research in education is now firmly established and is seen to be a legitimate approach to systematic enquiry.

Qualitative case study

I argue that my position as a teacher/researcher and the nature of the research setting lends itself to conducting a qualitative case study. The purpose of research is to inform and this is only possible if the findings can be believed. It is important that others can have confidence that the outcome of the research 'stands up'. This, it is argued, is particularly pertinent when it comes to research that is located in practice:

The applied nature of educational enquiry thus makes it imperative that researchers and others be able to trust the results of research – to feel confident that the study is valid and reliable (Merriam, 1988:164)

Validity, reliability and the qualitative case study

I want to discuss internal validity, reliability and external validity in the context of the qualitative case study. Internal validity refers to the extent to which the evidence presented can be supported by the data. In qualitative research the notion of an objective reality to be discovered is replaced by one where reality refers to the presentation of 'defensible knowledge claims' (Kvale, 1996: 241). Interpretive internal validity is about attempting to present an accurate picture of how informants view themselves and their experiences. How can I, as a researcher, have confidence that what I am reporting is a fair representation of my respondents' views and lived experiences? In one respect there will always be a nagging feeling that I haven't got it right. Did I ask the right questions? Did the students understand the question? Have I interpreted the data correctly? Qualitative research is complex and it is unrealistic to expect 100 per cent validity; the best that one can do is to minimise invalidity and maximise validity (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

I attempted to maximise internal validity by adopting procedures that incorporated good practice throughout the research process, although I freely admit that aspects of my research fell well short of what might be described as the ideal. Carrying out a systematic enquiry for a research degree involves learning about the process as you go along. The Initial Study provided me

with knowledge, understanding and skills that I could take into the Main Study but that did not mean that I, or my research, could be described as the 'finished article' at the end of the process. If I were to undertake the research again I would undoubtedly make changes to aspects of the project. In the context of a novice researcher I did attempt to adopt procedures to maximise internal validity. I collected data from thirty three interviews and thus would argue that the data presented is comprehensive. Triangulation was achieved by interviewing teachers and students and by identifying students from diverse backgrounds so that I could obtain data from respondents with disparate experiences and views. I took care to produce interview guides that reflected the research questions and themes arising from the theoretical framework. I tried to ensure there was a consistency of approach to the analysis and evaluation of the data.

Reliability is a key requirement in quantitative research. If the research were to be repeated it should yield the same results. Clearly this is problematic for qualitative research because it is 'of the moment'; it is a product of particular circumstances at a particular moment in time and as such cannot be replicated:

Because what is being studied in education is assumed to be in flux, multifaceted, and highly contextual, because information gathered is a function of who gives it and how skilled s/he is at getting it, and because the emergent design of a qualitative case study precludes a priori controls, achieving reliability in the traditional sense is not only fanciful but impossible (Merriam, 1988).

However, it is possible to argue that the practices that maximise internal validity will in, and of themselves, support reliability. Here reliability refers to the way processes are replicated; the way processes are consistent and thorough. Indeed, it is suggested that for qualitative research 'reliability' should be replaced by dependability and consistency (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Qualitative researchers should strive to ensure that the results of the study are consistent with the data collected.

External validity or generalisability refers to the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations. External validity is a criterion normally associated with quantitative research. When applied to qualitative studies the question that has to be asked is if it is possible to generalise from a single case. If it is not possible to repeat the research because of its interpretive nature then how can the findings be generalised? One line of argument is to suggest that there is no need for research to draw general conclusions, that there is no need to generalise where research is undertaken into a particular situation for its own sake (Stake, 1994). I chose the case study approach because I wanted to understand a particular Access classroom. It was the particularity of the Access to Business classroom in terms of student diversity that prompted the research. However, whilst there can be justification for undertaking research for its own sake it does not address the criticism head on. In my view case study research is devalued if the argument is accepted that lessons learnt are never applicable elsewhere. The value of case study research is the potential of its use outside the immediate research setting.

From the perspective of traditional research design, not being able to make generalisations is seen as a limitation of the qualitative case study. An alternative approach is to reframe generalisation to mirror the assumptions that underpin qualitative research. Cronbach (1975) argues that social phenomena are too context-specific to permit generalisability and instead suggests that case study research generates 'working hypotheses'. These can then be used to support the understanding of other cases:

Working hypotheses not only take account of local conditions; they offer the individual educator some guidance in making choices - the results of which can be monitored and evaluated to make better future decisions (Merriam, 1988:175)

I referred above to my research having a focus on the particular. Stake (1978) argues that it is knowledge of the particular that allows for its application 'in new and foreign contexts' (Stake, 1978:7). The author coined the term 'naturalistic generalisation' to encapsulate the notion of knowledge of the particular that 'develop within a person as a product of experience' (Stake, 1978:7).

The case study is an:

Investigation of a single case to understand it in its particularity, this understanding necessarily being reliant on the personal characteristics of the researcher, and designed to provide vicarious experience for readers, so as to facilitate the process of naturalistic generalisation (Stake, 2000:268)

Lincoln and Guba (1979) draw upon the work of Cronbach (1975) and Stake (1978) to argue that the 'working hypothesis' is a more appropriate way to conceptualise generalisation. Lincoln and Guba (1985) go on to introduce

alternative concepts of 'transferability' and 'fittingness'. Here the argument is that the transferability of a working hypothesis to other circumstances will depend upon the extent to which the original situation matches or fits the new situation. The researcher's task is to provide findings that are trustworthy and authentic (Lincoln and Guba, 2000) and it is for the reader to determine the applicability of the findings to the new research setting. Similarly:

Generalisation and application are matters of judgement rather than calculation, and the task of case study is to produce ordered reports of experience which invite judgement and offer evidence to which judgement can appeal (Stenhouse, 1988:49).

The emphasis is on the reader to make judgements about the applicability of research findings. However, Williams (2002) argues that there is a requirement for generalisations to be made because without them research is 'inadequate as a basis for policy action' (Williams, 2002:138). He uses the concept of 'moderatum generalisation' to argue that particular aspects of a case 'can be seen to be instances of a broader recognisable set of features' (Williams, 2002:131). This echoes a feeling I believe case study researchers may have about their work. The feeling that there is something going on that can have something to say to about the world outside the specific research setting:

The case investigated is a microcosm of some larger system or of a whole society: that what is found is in some sense symptomatic of what is going on more generally (Gomm *et al*, 2000:99).

I noted above that I chose to carry out a case study for its own sake. The focus was thus on the particular, not the general. However, this does not mean that conclusions drawn from the particular cannot have resonance or

applicability to the world outside, to the 'general'. As long as the qualitative researcher is circumspect in the claims made and acknowledge the special relationship between interpretive research and external validity I believe that qualitative case study research can have something to say that is of value beyond the confines of the immediate research setting.

Ethics and educational research

Just as the issues of validity and reliability have to be addressed in research so does that of ethics. Research must be conducted in an ethical manner and the main issue in this regard arises out of the extent to which the research process and its subject matter affect the participants. Researchers are expected to respect the rights and dignity of participants, avoid harming participants and operate with honesty and dignity (Denscombe, 2003). Although ethical issues need to be considered at the design stage, ethical questions need to be taken into consideration throughout the research process from beginning to end (Kvale, 1996). Before the research begins it is important to gain access to the research setting and acceptance of the research proposal:

Permission to carry out an investigation must always be sought at an early stage. As soon as you have an agreed project outline and have read enough to convince yourself that the topic is feasible, it is advisable to make a formal, written approach to the individuals and organisation concerned, outlining your plans (Bell, 1987:42).

As a teacher/researcher this was a straightforward exercise. Although further education is a relatively under researched sector there was no resistance from the college's management. As a research project that had as one of its

aims a desire to improve practice I was encouraged to undertake the investigation and received written permission to undertake the research at an early stage (see appendix 1).

Social research usually requires informed consent and a guarantee of confidentiality for the research site and respondents. Informed consent 'arises from the subject's right to freedom and self-determination' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000: 51) and is linked to the basic rights associated with living in a democracy. I required informed consent from the teachers and students I interviewed. Informed consent is not unproblematic. It should allow for the possibility of refusal. But how realistic is this where the person asking is a teacher/researcher or a colleague? With regard to colleagues how easy would it be for a colleague to refuse where the subject knows that they are the only person approached or that if they didn't participate it would mean an important source of data was now not available? As far as other potential respondents are concerned, in a relationship of unequal power the freedom to refuse is perhaps constrained by the practical reality of the persisting roles of teacher and student that interviewer and interviewee have. The implicit pressure that the student has to say 'yes' to a request for an interview is also compounded by the interviewer's need to identify particular individuals that fit the study's requirements. This can be expressed in appeals to potential respondents to cooperate that can be difficult to resist.

Informed consent requires respondents to know what the research is about. I explained that it was part of a research degree I was studying for with the

Open University. I outlined the purpose of the research and the research methods I would employ that would impact upon them. I highlighted the two roles that I had in relation to the students. I pointed out that they should try and see me as someone wearing two hats. Most of the time I would be wearing a metaphorical teacher's hat, but occasionally I would be wearing my researcher's hat. I tried to emphasise that anything that was said in the interview room would have no bearing on their progress on the course and that I would not let other students and other teachers know of anything that they might say (good or bad). Evidence from my research suggests to me that these assurances, at least partially, allowed students to speak their minds freely. My research did not involve participant observation or taking research notes during the class so the two roles, at least explicitly, were quite well demarcated and I think this helped – I was a researcher in the interview room and a teacher the rest of the time.

Participants are more likely to give informed consent if they can have confidence that their identity will remain hidden. Anonymity or confidentiality is also a matter of ethics. It should not be possible for a reader of the research to identify any of the actors who contributed data. This is particularly relevant to qualitative research where some of the data comprises extracts from interview transcriptions. It was made clear to the students that any information would remain confidential and when student contributions were used in the research I would ensure they were anonymous and I would use pseudonyms. The same assurances were given to the two staff I interviewed

in the Initial Study and the focus groups of students in the Initial Study and for staff in the Main Study.

Data collection methods

The case study approach allows for a variety of data collection techniques and I shall discuss the methods I employed for the study. The research that I am reporting has arisen from a study conducted over three years involving two cohorts of Access to Business students.

The interview

The main data collection technique I employed was the interview. I interviewed two Access tutors for the Initial Study and sixteen students for the main study. Qualitative research interviews are carried out so that information can be obtained that cannot be obtained by observation alone. Interviews are conducted with a view to finding out something from the perspective of the interviewee, it attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of people's experiences, to uncover their lived world. Interviews can range from the highly structured through to the unstructured interview. I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews for three reasons. Firstly I knew the questions I wanted answered, or rather, I thought I knew the questions I wanted answered. Secondly, I wanted to carry out a comparative analysis on the data and asking the same questions to different respondents facilitated this. Finally, I felt that as a novice researcher, the semi-structured interview allowed me an element of control and as an

adjunct to this, probably suited my personality more than the un-structured interview.

The interview process begins by determining whom to interview. The object is obtaining analysable data and so consideration needs to be given to 'the potential of each person to contribute to the development of insight and understanding of the phenomenon' (Merriam, 1988:77). It is not the concern of the qualitative research interview to obtain objective 'facts' but to obtain authentic accounts of subjective experience. An effective interview is one where an environment is created for constructing knowledge. Here, it is suggested, the interview process creates an environment where views are interchanged between two people and out of this dialogue fresh insights can develop: The qualitative research interview is a construction site of knowledge, 'an interview is literally an *inter view*, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest' (Kvale, 1996:1-2).

The purpose of the interview is to get analysable data and the key to this is effective questioning. Interview questions arise out of the research questions. I compiled interview guides for my interviews with the tutors for the Initial Study (see appendix 4). I also drew up interview guides for the two sets of student interviews for the Main Study (see appendix 6 & 7). The way questions are worded has to be carefully considered. It is important that words and phrasing are chosen that are familiar to the listener. I checked the

questions I incorporated into the guides I used to ensure as far as possible questions were free of jargon and for clarity.

The location of interviews needs to be given some consideration. The environment needs to be conducive for interviews in terms of the room being as comfortable as possible and quiet, a location where disturbance is kept to a minimum. I also needed to be sensitive to gender/religious issues when interviewing some respondents. Interviews can be recorded using a tape-recorder, note taking during interview or writing down from memory after the interview. I chose to record the interviews by tape-recorder. This allowed me to concentrate on posing the questions, listening carefully to the answers and observing the way the interviewee was responding to the situation.

The focus group

Focus groups are a form of group interview where participants take centre stage. Focus groups allow a dialogue to develop between members, for ideas to be developed, views and understandings shared. At the heart of the focus group is the idea that group interaction produces data and understanding that would not be so accessible without the interaction found in the group (Morgan, 1997). Because benefits are seen to arise out of the interaction of group members it is seen as important for the moderator to cede control to group members since this is seen as empowering. This would enable the individuals that make up the group to form a collective identity. The underlying assumption is that the information that is drawn out of this type of research method will be qualitatively different to what would be collected if

individuals were interviewed separately. This is because the knowledge constructed will arise out of the interplay between the actors who will have a different set of relationships to those that would arise out of one-to-one encounters. Respondents may be threatened by individual encounters particularly where the interviewer is an authority figure and where this could affect the efficacy of the interviewee responses. For these individuals, entering into a dialogue within a group environment, provide the opportunity for their voice to be heard when otherwise it might not. At a practical level the focus group provides the opportunity to hear the views of a number of respondents at the same time, which saves time at least at the stage of data collection, if not analysis.

There are number of disadvantages associated with using focus groups. Focus group moderation is a skill that develops with practice although it should be noted that the skills a teacher should be expected to possess should act as a useful starting point. Where focus groups are made up from pre-existing groups, as is the case in this particular study, the relationships between individuals, between sub-groups may affect focus group dynamic and dialogue:

Some individuals or sub-groups are likely to seek to overtly to dominate the group, while others may attempt covert domination or withdraw. This may be further complicated by the intrusion into the group process of status hierarchies that derive...between individuals within the group (Field, 2000).

Dominant characters may dominate the discourse; reflective respondents remain unheard. In choosing to use focus groups I decided that the

advantages outweighed the disadvantages. Additionally I felt that this approach was congruent with the overall theoretical framework, which places a strong emphasis upon the interaction of individuals in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998).

The questionnaire

The questionnaire has limitations in qualitative research because:

How can researchers (using questionnaires) legitimately understand the ways in which people interpret the world around them and act within their social universe? (May, 1993:87).

This is my view. However, just because this particular research instrument has limitations does not mean that it has no role in qualitative research. Since it is about communicating information to the researcher, care needs to be taken in its design. For effective communication to take place between researcher and respondent, the respondent must understand the question the way it is intended by the researcher:

It is essential that, regardless of the type of question asked, the language and the concepts behind the language should be within the grasp of the respondents (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007:322).

The researcher must also understand the answer intended by the respondent. To maximise the possibility that the researcher and respondents have a shared understanding it is important that, in formulating questions, the researcher is always thinking about what needs to be known and what the responses are going to be used for. Questionnaire designers need to ensure that the respondents are giving the same meaning to the words and component parts of any question posed, as is intended. Words need to carry shared meanings

and be selected for simplicity and specificity. Questions should be short and phrased positively. When designing questionnaires it is important to be aware of the issues surrounding the questionnaire as a research instrument. Whilst acknowledging the limitations of the questionnaire I used this method to collect data (see appendix 2) that I was able to use to support the design and employment of other research instruments, primarily with the interview guide and individual student interviews for the main research.

Conclusion

Methodology is about the research process and its underlying assumptions. I have tried to argue that the nature of the enquiry, my circumstances as a teacher/researcher and the setting for the investigation has governed my approach. Qualitative research in general and the qualitative case study in particular is the ideal approach to gain an insight into the lived experiences of Access students as they make their progress to university. My next task is to outline how I collected the data and the challenges I encountered in that process and I will turn to that in the next chapter.

Chapter Four

Data Collection

Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed methodological issues. I have used the qualitative case study approach to the collection of data. In this chapter I want to describe and discuss details of how I collected the data. This will also give me the opportunity to reflect on how effective I felt the methods were in collecting data and thus in contributing towards answering the research questions. The chapter will begin by examining the rationale for collecting the data by Access Class. I will then identify and discuss the methods of data collection I carried out for the Initial Study and then for the Main Study.

In Chapter one I referred to the catalyst that prompted me to undertake this project. I had observed that over the years the two classes that comprise the Access to Business programme exhibited different levels of performance. Class A consists of students who, in the main, are British born and/or educated in Britain. Class B is made of students who, in the main, were born in countries other than Britain and have English as their second language. They can also be characterised loosely as economic migrants. Performance can be judged in different ways but one particular measure that has been consistently applied over the life of the course is that of student dropout. I had observed that year after year more students withdraw from Class A than Class B in absolute terms and in proportion to those enrolled. On average, over the last four years, 33% of students in Class A have dropped out whereas in Class B

only 25% of the students have withdrawn early from the course. Further evidence of the difference in performance between the two groups can be found in data that compares course with national standards: (- = below national standard; + = above national standard, figures in percentages):

Fig 4.1

Retention			
Year	Class A	Class B	Combined
02/03	-5	+5	0
03/04	-1	+2	+ 0.5
04/05	-7	+6	- 0.5
05/06	+3	+6	+ 4.5
Average	-2.5	+4.8	+ 0.6

Source: Inner-London College's Pro-achieve data
 Class A – mainly English first language speakers, educated in this country
 Class B – mainly ESOL, formative education abroad

In Figure 4.1 it can be seen that over a four-year period Class B consistently outperforms Class A. In the first three academic years Class A's retention falls short of benchmark whilst Class B's performance, outperforms the benchmark data. In the year in which data was collected (05/06) both classes outperformed the benchmark data. The improvement in Class A's retention could possibly because of the 'Hawthorne effect' (Landsberger, 1958) where people being researched during a study change their performance. Notwithstanding this improvement, the data shows that Class B consistently outperforms Class. Additionally, this quantitative data helps to underpin the perception that colleagues and I have had over the years that Class A functions less effectively than Class B in terms of attendance, punctuality and attitude.

Most students from both classes are successful in their studies and in achieving the objective of gaining a place at university. The programme as a

whole performs satisfactorily when measured against national benchmark data. However, I felt that this differential performance coupled with the feeling that the two classes can be differentiated in terms of their effectiveness was not something that could be ignored and that it was a phenomenon that was worthy of research. After the Initial Study I decided to broaden the scope of the research but I still felt that the essential difference between the two groups should provide the rationale for the overall structure of the data collection. The 2004/5 cohort formed the research community for the Initial Study, the 2005/6 cohort for the Main Study and I used data from both years in the study.

I now want to outline the methods of data collection and I will take the opportunity to offer a rationale for my methods and offer an insight into my experiences during the process of collecting the data. I will begin by outlining the methods undertaken for the Initial Study.

Initial Study

The Initial Study involved exploring the progress of the Access students from enrolment/induction to the end of the first semester in February 2005. The object was to find out what students and teachers had to say about early departure, to find out their feelings about the phenomenon and to interpret what they had to say about it. As well as providing the opportunity to conduct research in its own right the Initial Study was also a *de facto* pilot study where I was able to pilot data collection techniques. This enabled me to 'practice' the techniques and help me make a judgement about their effectiveness and my competence.

The first method I used to collect data was a questionnaire (see appendix 2). I wanted to find out biographical details, reasons for joining the course and additional data that looked to build up a picture of the students' backgrounds. The questionnaire was intended to provide information for two purposes. Firstly, I thought that I could use the information to support subsequent interviews with withdrawn students. Secondly, it would provide me with data to inform the composition and progress of focus groups. I distributed approximately forty questionnaires to both classes, allowed the students time to complete them and then collected the questionnaires in.

I conducted two qualitative semi-structured interviews with two members of staff. One, Helen³, is the Access to Business Course tutor and the other was Katie³, who used to be an Access tutor (Computing) and is now a Head of School with line manager responsibilities for the Access to Computing course. Before the interviews I drew up a guide (see appendix 4) that consisted of questions that focused on their experience of the Access course and what they thought were the factors that influenced the retention and departure decisions of their students. I also asked questions around the issue of how the classroom functioned as a learning community. I approached both interviews with a working assumption of shared experiences and meanings. The first interview I conducted was with Helen, the Access to Business tutor. To begin with I felt that the dialogue was 'forced'; it was influenced by its circumstances. However, as the interview progressed the atmosphere relaxed and I felt that something approaching a natural dialogue began to take shape although there

³ Names changed to protect anonymity

were only relatively short passages where I felt that a 'true' dialogue was taking place. However, for a first interview I was relatively pleased with the way it went and felt that some useful information had resulted. I conducted the second interview with Katie in an interview room at the College centre where she works. After the interview I felt comfortable about the way the interview went and felt that a proper dialogue had taken place. I felt that we were co-constructing knowledge through the interview process and it began to take on a 'life of its own'. I found that I was developing knowledge by this dialogue the interview was real shared experience where at a fairly deep level there were shared meanings.

For the Initial Study I also conducted two focus group interviews using an interview guide (see appendix 5), one with students from Class A and one with students from Class B. I wanted to know their motives for joining the course, reaction of family and friends of their decision to become an Access student, relationship with fellow students, pressures of the course and factors that influence persistence or early withdrawal. I was the facilitator and a combination of convenience sampling, and a desire to have the age and gender composition of the class represented, determined the make-up of the groups. An effective focus group interview is one where the moderator, at least for some of the time, becomes a peripheral figure and 'disappears' into the background. This then allows the group to interact in a more 'natural setting' allowing knowledge to be constructed, allowing student voices to be heard. There were a number of reasons why I think this did not happen. My inexperience meant that the way the interviews were conducted affected the

way they performed. I failed to 'take a back seat', students were looking to me for prompts and student contributions were addressed to me, not the group. The first group consisted of second language speakers whose inabilities to express themselves in English may well have limited their ability to effectively participate in such a setting. In the second interview the participants were all first language speakers and as a consequence a better dialogue developed. One problem was that one particular participant tended to dominate the group but because I 'liked' what I was hearing I allowed his contributions to dominate. As with the other group I failed to allow the group to interact with each other rather than through me. On reflection what was supposed to be focus group groups turned into *de facto* group interviews. Although I was able to use the data for the Initial Study I decided that it was superseded by data collected from the individual interviews conducted in the second year of the study.

Finally, I intended to interview a number of the students that had withdrawn. However, I was unable to contact them and instead I decided to draw on the in-depth knowledge of Helen, their tutor. I set up a meeting with her and we discussed each withdrawn student in turn in an attempt to identify the reasons why the students had left the course before the winter break.

Reflection on Initial Study

Although committed to a naturalistic enquiry for principally pragmatic and practical reasons I was able to use the Initial Study to reflect on the actual methods of data collection, within that paradigm, in terms of their

effectiveness in collecting analysable data. Individual and focus group interviews are, in principal, appropriate methods but I wanted to consider which methods I should employ for the Main Study and this meant considering what I felt suited me best in the context of the specific research setting I found myself in. Collecting data is at the very heart of research and the importance of choosing the right method(s) led me to decide not to use focus groups of persisting students for three main reasons. Firstly I felt that my role as their teacher affected the way the focus group functioned. Unequal relations of power created an extra dimension within the focus group that had an impact on its process and outcomes in terms of the data that emerged. Secondly, the focus group made up of second-language speakers didn't function as a focus group and failed to elicit meaningful data that could be used for comparative purposes. Finally, my experience of running the focus groups led me to conclude that I lacked the confidence to effectively use this method for the collection of data from the students. In some contrast to these experiences I was more pleased with how the interviews had gone with the two Access tutors. Although I was initially ill at ease whilst interviewing Helen that feeling went away and I felt that a useful dialogue developed. My interview went even better with Katie and so I came to the conclusion that my principal method of data collection would be the individual interview although I also decided to use a focus group where the participants were teachers rather than students.

Main Study

For the Main Study I used a questionnaire and the semi-structured individual interview to collect data from the students and a focus group to collect data from the Access to business teachers.

The questionnaire

I used the same questionnaire for the Main Study as I did for the Initial Study (see appendix 3) and distributed it to all the students in both classes early on in the course after explaining to them that it was part of the research I was undertaking. Although the questionnaire had originally been designed for the narrower purpose of investigating the causes of student dropout I felt that it would also be useful to supply me with foundational/formative details of the students that would become potential subjects for the Main Study. The questionnaire asked respondents about their family and educational background, present circumstances (home/study environment, working/not working), journey to work and reasons for joining the course. The questions were underpinned by the theoretical framework that foregrounded identity, diversity and difference. I was able to draw up basic biographical details of all the students in both classes. Collecting this data and turning it into brief biographies helped me to gain greater insight into the students' as individuals at an earlier stage than would normally arise from the weekly teacher/student interactions that occur through the normal teaching and learning processes. It helped me to 'learn' about them as individuals and sensitised me to the student-to-student interactions that were taking place in the classroom as I taught them. I was then able to use this information to decide who I would

eventually choose to interview. The information also provided me with background information that I could use during the interviews themselves.

The semi-structured interview

The semi-structured interviews I conducted with the Access to Business students were the principal means of collecting data about the students' experiences. I therefore want to discuss how I chose the students to interview and the rationale and practicalities of the interview process. I will then reflect on my experiences of conducting them.

Choosing the students to interview

The size of each class meant it was not possible to interview all the students and so it became necessary to select a sample. I treated each class as a separate entity for sampling purposes. My aim was to identify a number of students to interview from Class A that could represent all the students in Class A and do the same for Class B. Since a key element of the study was experience in a diverse setting I decided I should put some emphasis on ensuring that there was at least a 'representative' from the different groups within each class. This raised a number of questions. How was I going to decide the boundaries and membership of each group? What criteria was I going to apply to define the group? Should I decide these matters or should the students have a voice? Maybe a student could be chosen that could represent more than one group, a case of 'killing two (or more) birds with one stone'.

Another factor that was pertinent related to the students, mainly in Class B, whose first language was not English. The experience of carrying out focus group interviews with the previous year's cohort made me realise there were a number of difficulties for the qualitative researcher related to respondent command of the English language (or for that matter the interviewer's command of the interviewee's first language). I had to take into consideration the extent to which I felt that there would be sufficient mutual understanding between a particular student and myself. By the time the interviews were conducted I had got to know the students quite well and had formed opinions in this regard. I also had to consider the fact that the interview would need to be taped, transcribed, checked, edited and analysed. This meant I had to bear in mind issues surrounding diction and clarity of expression. Additionally, the fact that I had got to know all the students in both classes quite well meant that I had developed relationships with them and formed opinions about them. I got on better with some than others and by the time of the first interview I had attached labels to them with regard to their attitude and aptitude. My opinions of the students will have been shaped by the extent to which they will have aligned themselves with the practices of the programme. In choosing the students to be interviewed personal preference also became a factor. Finally, I was confronted with the practical reality of identifying particular students and agreeing a time and place to conduct the interview. This introduced a further complication, student accessibility and willingness to be interviewed. Students who regularly attended and kept up with their work were in better positions to cooperate than those who often missed lessons and who were behind in their studies.

I drew up a list of students that, on the one hand, took into consideration some aspects of these questions and constraints and, on the other, attempted to balance the sample with respect to age, gender, ethnicity and nationality. However, it is important to acknowledge two aspects of the sample that could skew the data. Firstly, I didn't interview any students who by that time were 'at risk', that is, likely to drop out. This was partly related to how I would feel about interviewing students that weren't identifying with discourse of the programme and the fact that such students' attendance, punctuality and perceived reliability meant that I didn't feel I could count on them as respondents. I also had in mind the fact that I wanted to re-interview the students at the end of the course and it made sense to interview students who I felt had a good chance of persisting to the end. Secondly, the sample of students from Class B was less representative than that of Class A because of my concern to choose students I felt could 'perform' in an interview situation given their second language status. The practical outcome was that the Class B sample had fewer older students than I would have liked. Against this backdrop I chose eight students from each class to contact. I subsequently approached the students I had identified at the end of October 2005, explained again the nature of the research and their role in it and obtained informed consent (for a list of the respondents see p.96). In Class A the sample consisted of four men and four women. Four were aged between twenty and twenty-four and the remainder were all over thirty years of age. Three were born in Britain of Afro-Caribbean/African background. Those not born in Britain were from Russia, Brazil, Sierra Leone, Somalia and the Sudan. In Class B the sample was made up of an equal number of men and

women. One was forty years old and the others were between nineteen and twenty-six years of age. Students were born in Lithuania (two), France, Germany, Holland, Spain, Portugal and Morocco with various ethnic identities.

The interviews

Having drawn up a list of students to be interviewed the next task was to determine the number of interviews and the timing and duration of each. I decided that I would interview each student in the two classes twice. The first set of interviews (Interview 1), sixteen in all, took place between November 2005 and January 2006 and took between thirty and forty-five minutes to complete. The second set of interviews (Interview 2), fifteen in total, was conducted in May and June 2006. Each interview lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes.

I made the decision to conduct two sets of interviews separated by time for theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, the Access course is about sociological repositioning and changes to identity. I felt that the study would benefit from investigating this change and any associated altered perspectives on how the Access course was experienced. This would then facilitate a comparative analysis of the responses from the two sets of interviews. Practical considerations also played a part in carrying out two sets of interviews. As a novice researcher I felt that having two opportunities to gather data would increase the chances of collecting appropriate information to address the research questions posed by the study (see p.14).

Additionally, this approach meant I was able to focus on different aspects of the enquiry in the two interviews. It also gave me the opportunity to reflect on how I felt the first set of interviews went and how I might approach the second set.

The guides for Interview 1 and Interview 2 were informed by the literature review, the theoretical framework, and the research questions. The guides consisted of questions that I believed, taken together, would help to answer the key research questions (see p.14). The interview guide for the first set of interviews (Interview 1) consisted of sixteen questions (see appendix 6). The purpose of these questions was for me to gain an insight into students' backgrounds, motivations for joining the course, attitudes of their friends and family to their (re)engagement in education, classroom experience, attitudes towards studying in a diverse social space and how their experience had changed them as a person, if it had. The interview guide for the second set of interviews (Interview 2) comprised six questions (see appendix 7) and explored the extent to which previous educational experience affected study, how the course had changed identity, the formation and functioning of learning communities and issues surrounding retention and dropout.

Reflection on student interviews

Although I have used various sources to collect data, student interviews were my key method and I want to reflect on my experiences of conducting them.

The respondents

One particular aspect of this decision that I want to highlight and which has implications for future research is the issue of sampling. Constraints on time meant I was obliged to sample the two Access classes to identify students to interview. Sampling a population is always a compromise. However, there were two factors that I believe made such a compromise more problematic and had methodological implications. Firstly, the research design required two sets of interviews separated by time (see p.82/83). This meant that sampling was constrained by the requirement to choose students where there was a reasonable expectation that they would still be on the course at the end of the programme when the follow up interviews would be conducted. Consequently, the sample was skewed towards students I perceived as having the potential to persist on the course. This meant that those students I saw as being at risk of not completing the course were excluded from the research and their voices were not heard. Similarly, the voices I heard were those of students that were more likely to have aligned themselves with the discourse and practices of the Access programme, further distorting the findings. I made suggestions about the cohort as a whole particularly with respect to access to resources (habitus and forms of capital) without having access to data about those students I didn't interview, including those who withdrew from the course as a whole. One way to get round this problem might have been to expand the sample size so that I could deliberately target these students perceived as being at risk of dropping out. Involvement in the research might have encouraged them to persist with their studies and

allowed me to learn about the views of students operating at the margins of the learning community.

The second factor relates to interviews where the interviewer is monolingual and the interviewee has to use a language, which is not their first. I tasked myself to conduct the interviews and, being a monolingual speaker, my inability to speak in my respondents' first language was a constraint.

Similarly, I had to take into consideration my judgement of potential respondents' competence in English when deciding whom to interview. To get round this problem I could have used research assistants to conduct the interviews in their own language. The interview transcripts would have then had to have been transcribed and translated before the data could have been analysed.

Research design

Students on Access course are involved in changing their identities (Brine & Waller, 2004) and one of the reasons I chose to conduct two sets of interviews, separated by time, was to look for evidence of change in their identities. I had intended to explore the extent to which students changed between interviews as evidenced by the data emerging from the two sets of interviews. However, for three reasons I made the decision to abandon this approach. Firstly, I decided that 'change' in relation to the student experience as expressed in interview responses were not in and of themselves relevant. This does not mean that I did not witness change but it was not evident in

relation to which particular interview (Student Interview 1 or Student Interview 2) the data was drawn from. This was because both interviews explored different aspects of the student experience. Secondly, the later interview asked the students to reflect back on the year's experiences including those experiences that predated the first interview. And finally, I decided that the issue of change was not in and of itself central to addressing the research questions.

The teacher as researcher

The teacher/researcher role is qualitatively different to that of the researcher. It has its advantages and disadvantages. I am in a position of power and some students may well want to 'please' me by giving the answer they think I want to hear. They may be unwilling to criticise aspects of the course or particular teachers either because they don't want to be disrespectful or they may feel that it may affect their position on the course. A major advantage is that I 'know' about them and they will 'know' about me. I know them as students of my subjects, Accounts and Statistics. I will have a view about them as students and I will have developed a relationship with each of them that has arisen out of interacting with them for 3 ½ hours a week. I will like some more than others and in turn they will have their own opinion about what they feel about me. The nature of the relationship that has developed between the student and myself will impact upon the interview, the data and its interpretation. In the second set of interviews all the respondents knew they were on course to pass and progress to university. They knew me well by then and they knew that whatever they said it would not jeopardise their

future. Because the interviews were semi-structured they can take on a life of their own. In one an extended dialogue took place about a traumatic childhood that may have crowded out data about other aspects I should/could have explored. In the interviews with students whose first language is not English I needed to have an awareness that English acts as an additional filter or barrier. I cannot be certain that the interviewee has understood the question in the same way as English speakers and the response is constrained by command of English. Some answers lacked fluency, some were sparse, others verbose. At times, with some students, I found myself interrupting and finishing sentences, and anticipating/summarising answers. Looking back over the thirty-one interviews I conducted with the students I would like to think that I improved as an interviewer, although I should not ignore the reality that I am drawing on data collected during the process of my own education as a researcher and so data collected later might be more reliable than that collected at the beginning.

The interviews

After completing the first set of interviews with the students from the two classes I reflected on the experience and considered how I might change the way I would repeat the process at the end of the academic year. I came to the conclusion that I had asked too many questions for the amount of time that the interviews were taking. A semi-structured interview should be allowed to develop in an organic way and I felt that my inexperience led me to over-control the interviews. To correct this flaw I made changes to the interview guide (appendix 7) for the second set of interviews (Student

Interview 2). I wanted to allow the students to open up and so I decided to cut down the number of questions to six, supported by prompts if and when required. In these interviews I was looking to investigate the extent to which previous educational experience affected study, how the course had changed identity, the formation and functioning of learning communities and issues surrounding retention and dropout. The interviews, fifteen in total, were conducted in May and June 2006 and took between 45 minutes and 60 minutes. Even though I was allowing more time for interviewees to answer fewer questions, I believe the way I used the probing questions led to a tightening of the interview process.

Despite the methodological and practical reservations I had about the process of collecting data in this way I still believe that the interviews did yield data that I am confident will help to address my research questions and subsequently help to inform educational policy and practice.

The focus group

Although I had not had a particularly positive experience of conducting focus groups with the students I still believed that I should employ this particular method of data collection with the Access to Business teachers. I therefore conducted a focus group interview with six Access teachers in July 2006 using an interview guide. The intention was to explore issues of difference, diversity, dropout and improvement. Unfortunately, for a number of reasons the focus group was ineffective. Firstly, the interview took place at a time when all of the members of the team were under threat of redundancy.

Members of the focus group were in a 'pool' of lecturers out of which some would be made redundant. We were effectively only a few days away from facing interviews that would affect our future careers. Understandably these circumstances did not create an environment that was conducive to engaging in cooperative discourse. In the focus group only two members of staff participated fully leaving others largely silent. I was obviously aware of the situation affecting the atmosphere and this made me reticent about encouraging fuller participation because I knew that staff were 'just not in the mood'. Secondly, instead of conducting the session at the College it took place away from the College as part of the annual course review and evaluation. I did this because I thought that, given the nature of the subject matter, it would be a useful exercise for my research and for informing practice. However, the unfamiliar surroundings contributed to the uncomfortable atmosphere. Thirdly, because the focus group was part of a day devoted to the course and not a discrete event the time available meant I felt under pressure to complete it in too short a time. I discovered the final problem once the transcript was returned to me. The transcriber was unable to pick up some of the dialogue resulting in gaps in the transcript.

Process of analysis

The interviews were transcribed by a typist who was instructed to transcribe in detail but was not required to identify pauses, repetitions, and emphasis in intonation, emotions such as sighs and laughter or other extraneous information. I began the analysis by ensuring that as far as possible each transcript was an accurate representation of the interview. The tapes were

played and the associated transcripts read from the computer screen to check for errors and make corrections as appropriate. At the same time I also tidied up the dialogue to make it grammatically correct. This was done because it did not detract from establishing patterns in the data and will make the dialogue more accessible for the reader. Once I was satisfied with the accuracy of the transcripts I printed them off. For the first set of student interviews I had sixteen transcripts and for the second set, fifteen.

Data analysis is characterised as being the stage that follows collection of the data. However, in practice, analysis can be said to occur before and during as well as after data is collected. Before collection the researcher thinks about a phenomenon, formulates questions to be asked and has in mind possible answers. During an interview particular responses may be picked up on because the researcher feels 'it will have something to say' in the context of the study. However, the formal process of analysis occurs once the interviews have been concluded. The purpose of qualitative research is to interpret or make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). An interpretive case study suggests a process of analysis that is inductive where findings and theory emerge from the data. But this does not mean that the data emerges out of a vacuum. Interpretive research begins with an:

Organising image of the phenomenon under study and the selection of facts and the searching for order among them is guided by some prior notions or theories about the nature of the social phenomenon under study (Merriam, 1988, citing Riley 1963:5-6).

The theoretical framework and research questions informed the interview guide for each set of interviews. A data set emerged out of each interview and I analysed each interview with conceptual themes derived from the interview questions and the associated responses. In the first set of interviews categories emerged that were associated with student background, reasons for joining the course, initial feelings about being a student again and issues around identity, diversity and the formation and functioning of groups within the class. In the second set of interviews I collected data that covered the same categories and also attitudes towards student dropout. I either annotated each script in the margin with key words and phrases taken from the data or I underlined passages I judged as being pertinent. I then set up a database that contained quotes or summaries of quotes relating to the categories of analysis. I then used the database to provide me with information so that I could access the actual interview scripts. I could then select data items to illustrate and inform the analysis.

Conclusion

I have outlined the methods of data collection I used in the interim and main study. I have also reflected on the methods and how effective I found them to be in allowing for the collection of analysable data. For the purpose of analysis I shall be relying principally on the data collected from the interviews conducted with the teachers in the Initial Study and the students in the main study although I also intend to draw on the findings of the focus group interviews I conducted with the students in the Initial Study. I shall now turn to the analysis of the data I have collected.

Chapter Five

Data Analysis

Introduction

In the previous chapter I explained how I collected the data. In this chapter the purpose is to analyse the data collected. The data for analysis is derived from a number of sources. Data has been collected from interviews with two Access tutors that took place as part of the Initial Study and from two sets of interviews (Interview 1 and 2) with Access students carried out as part of the Main Study. A data set emerged out of each interview transcript and I analysed each transcript with conceptual themes derived from the data. I separated the data drawn from the student interviews by class (Class A and Class B). Each class is theorised as a distinct community of learning. By separating the data I hoped to facilitate a comparative analysis where I looked for similarities and differences within and between each class. For a variety of reasons I was unable to use the focus group data collected as part of the Initial Study and Main Study (see previous chapter).

The structure of this chapter is governed by my desire to address the research questions posed by the study (see p.14). I want to discover how students from diverse backgrounds experience learning on the Access to Business course. To do this I will begin by analysing the data I collected about the family and educational background of the students I interviewed and will follow this up with an analysis of the students' reasons for re-engaging with education. Learning about students' backgrounds will provide

information to set the context for an exploration of the relationship between identity and experience. An examination of their backgrounds will also give me the opportunity to answer the question as to the extent to which Inner-London College's Access to Business course attracts students from groups under-represented in higher education (see p.14). I will then go on to analyse the experiences of those interviewed at induction, in the period following induction when learning communities are formed, and then once they are fully functioning communities of practice. The chapter continues with an exploration of the perspectives and perceptions of continuing students as they contemplate the reasons for student dropout. It concludes with an examination of the perceived 'difference' between the two classes that arises from the course's recruitment policy.

I have drawn on two sets of interviews conducted with students from the two Access to Business classes (Class A and Class B). A common characteristic of both classes is that they are diverse in terms of age, nationality and ethnicity. However, the two classes have their own identity arising out of the course's recruitment policy (see p.9-11). Class A consists of students who were born and educated in this country or have lived in this country for a number of years. Those born abroad have either come here as refugees or as economic migrants. All will have had experience of the English educational system, either at school and/or college. English is their first language or they have lived long enough in this country to have sufficient command of the language not to need additional language support. Class B is mainly made up of students who were born and educated abroad and have

English as their second language. They are in Class B because they are deemed to require additional support with their written English. These students have come to London as economic migrants either in their own right or as part of a family looking to improve their prospects by coming to this country as previously discussed. Thus, the classes have a distinct identity arising out the students' backgrounds. They also have a distinct identity relating to the relative performance in terms of retention and perceived effectiveness (see p.71/72). The common diversity and distinct identity of the two classes provides an opportunity to explore common themes from the perspective of students from two different classes following the same programme of study and taught by the same teachers.

I have examined the data by carrying out a comparative analysis. The comparative analysis will look for similarities and differences within each class and between the two classes (Class A and Class B) as evidenced by the data from interviews collected at the beginning of the course (Interview 1) and those conducted towards the end of the course (Interview 2). By comparative I mean that I initially analysed the data for each class separately before looking for similarities and differences and thereby coming to some conclusions. The comparative analysis is therefore reflected in the presentation in this chapter.

I drew on sources of identity together with factors associated with the research methodology to identify a number of students from each class to

‘represent’ the class as a whole (see p.79-82). The table below identifies the students I interviewed from each class⁴ (see appendix 3 and appendix 4).

Class A

	Gender	Age	Country of Birth	Ethnicity
Robert	M	40	England	Black/British-Caribbean
Lauren	F	38	England	Black/British-Caribbean
Sophie	F	20	England	Black/British-African
Zakia	F	22	Somalia	Black/African
Frederic	M	33	Sierra Leone	Black/African
Joan	F	32	Sudan	Black/African
Danni	M	24	Russia	White-Other
Alberto	M	20	Brazil	White-Other

Class B

	Gender	Age	Country of Birth	Ethnicity
Feluga	F	40	Morocco	Arab
Jose	M	26	Spain	White-Other
Valdas	M	24	Lithuania	White-Other
Armita	F	19	Lithuania	White-Other
Faisal	M	20	Holland	Arab
Halice	F	24	Iran	Arab
Nadia	F	19	Sao Tome	Mixed-White/Black African
Andre	M	23	France	Black-African

As well as drawing on sources of identity to select which student to interview, identity as a concept plays a key role in my analysis. I have talked about the fluidity of identity in contemporary society (see p.27-33). In another study students describe their own identities as ‘multifaceted, multisourced and multilayered’(Shaw, 1999:169). However, in order to analyse the effect that diversity has on the classroom, I used categories such as age, ethnicity and nationality because they ‘have emerged as salient ways to...describe difference’ (Dolby, 2000).

⁴ I have changed students’ names to protect anonymity

Access, student background and educational engagement

I want to analyse the data I collected about the students' family and educational backgrounds and reasons for (re)engaging in education for two reasons. Firstly, this will set the context for an exploration of their experiences on the Access to Business course and secondly, it will help me to explore the extent to which the course attracts students from groups under-represented in higher education.

Family and educational background

Family and educational background will influence whether to participate in post-compulsory education (Courtney, 1992) and the nature of that participation (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; Tinto, 1975). The interviews I conducted gave the opportunity to explore their lives prior to their course at the college.

Class A

In this class students were all born and educated in this country or had spent a number of years in Britain prior to the beginning of the Access course. Those born in this country (Robert, Lauren and Sophie) came from immigrant families whose parents had not been to university. Robert and Lauren have Afro-Caribbean parents and Sophie's are Ghanaian. These students' schooling did not prepare them for university and for Robert there was an expectation that school would be followed by work:

My parents' influence was that I would start work when I was about sixteen and that is what happened; I thought that was the norm (Interview 1).

He considered his experience of secondary school as 'somewhat negative' and felt that 'there was not enough care at the time for young inner-city type kids' (Interview 1). Lauren had to leave school at fifteen after getting pregnant and, although she had attempted to re-engage with education since school, she found the pressures of bringing up her children meant she was unable to complete courses she had started. Reflecting on her schooling, Sophie spoke of having been 'easily distracted' and saw herself as a 'trouble maker' (Interview 1). This, she believed, affected her GCSE grades and meant she was denied the opportunity to study for university.

The other students I interviewed in this class were all born abroad but have lived a number of years in this country. When Frederic, Joan and Zakia first came to this country they arrived as refugees, having escaped civil war in their countries of birth. Frederic and Joan see themselves as coming from privileged backgrounds and previously had received a good education in their place of birth. Zakia had been separated from her parents when she was five years old as a consequence of civil war and has never been reunited with them. After travelling and living in different countries she found herself in London at the age of fifteen. No school would take her on, so she studied on a vocational business course in a local college. Danni and Alberto can be described as economic migrants. Their parents saw Britain as the right location for their children to further their education. Danni was able to join his mother, a university graduate and BBC World service journalist in London to attend secondary school and learn English. He left school and went to college where he dropped out so that he could travel. Alberto left Brazil with his

family when he was nine because Alberto's parents wanted him to be educated in England. After gaining good GCSE's he returned to Brazil. Having investigated the possibility of going to university in his home country he decided he would rather go to university in Britain and so he returned to this country. All the students in this class had experience of being educated in this country.

Students in Class A have similar backgrounds. However, there were differences. The three British born students of migrant families (Robert, Lauren and Sophie) had parents who had not been to university and whose educational experiences prior to the Access course were problematic. This can be contrasted with the students born abroad. Frederic and Joan describe their backgrounds as privileged and education as good. Danni was able to take advantage of his mother's position as a London journalist and Alberto's family move to this country to enable their son to benefit from an English education. He also was in possession of GCSEs. All the students had friends who had been to university

Class B

All the students I interviewed in this class were born outside the UK. Feluga, Jose, Valdas and Faisal found their way onto the Access to Business course after first coming to London as young adults for non-educational reasons. Feluga, whose background is privileged, first came to London having completed her initial education to study pharmacology. She failed in that ambition but decided anyway to settle down in this country. Jose's father had

been to university, all his friends were going to university and there was an expectation that he would go too. However, after school Jose came to London to visit a friend and decided he would stay. There was an expectation that Valdas would go to university after school but instead he chose the army. After a short period he left the army and came to London to visit and 'earn some money'. Similarly Faisal, who after school came to London for a holiday but decided to stay, find work and a place to live. The remaining students in this class came to London with their families. Armita has a mother who went to university. Her father came to England in the 1990s to work as an agricultural labourer and now runs a business. Armita and the rest of the family joined him in 2000 when she was nearly fifteen. Halice, born in Iran, moved to Germany with her family when she was two years old. After school in Germany she moved to London to live with a relative with the intention of going to university. Nadia moved to Portugal with her family because her mother felt that moving to Britain would be economically and educationally advantageous.

The students in Class B have similar backgrounds. They can be described as 'economic migrants' because they came to this country with their families or on their own volition to better themselves. All had friends and/or family who had been to university.

Both classes

The division of students into two distinct classes arose out of the course's recruitment policy (see p.9-11). Another difference was in the composition of

the two classes with respect to the students' membership of groups that the Access admission policy was designed to target (see p.7). Whereas three out of the of the students interviewed in Class A were members of such groups only one in Class B (Zakia) could be described that way. Class A had a higher proportion of students belonging to targeted groups than Class B.

However, there was one characteristic that was common to both sets of students interviewed from the two classes. All had family and friends who had been to university and a majority of the students in both classes were in possession of habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1984) that normalised participation in post-compulsory education.

Exploring the backgrounds of the students highlighted another issue surrounding the nature of the student intake. I plotted the geographical locations of where the students lived and noted that all the students lived in locations where the majority of the local population are 'White British'. Thus, the course only attracted students from minority ethnic backgrounds. White British underachievers were not applying to study on the course despite the fact that this particular group is one that Access is designed to attract.

Reasons for (re)engaging in education

Students on Access courses are involved in identity change (Brine and Waller, 2004) and identity construction (Britton and Baxter, 1999). Change and construction involves making conscious choices about what practical action to

take and this becomes embodied into the identity of the individual. Thus, an analysis of students' reasons for deciding to study will provide additional data to help to answer the question of the Access to Business course's ability to attract members of groups under-represented in higher education. An appreciation of the circumstances and motivations that led them to consider (re)engaging in education will also help to set the context for an exploration of the key research question.

Class A

In this class Robert had realised from the age of twenty-five that he had missed out on education. In the last six years he had worked for a small publishing company where he got on well with his work colleagues but there was no scope for promotion and he didn't feel stretched:

This is the time in my life when I decided I wanted to advance my academic path (Interview 1).

Frederic had not been able to finish a number of courses previously attempted because of the situation in his home country where civil war was threatening his family and this affected his ability to focus on his studies. It was only now that this student felt able to concentrate on education and make a break from the past:

I feel mentally prepared, I feel like this is the best time for me to do it. I want to change my life (and you can't do that) when you haven't got a proper academic background (Interview 1).

Lauren and Joan made the connection between finishing an aspect of their role as mothers and doing something for themselves. Lauren saw now as 'the right time for me to do it':

I've decided I wanted to do something because you know I've been raising my kids and I just thought I must do something (Interview 1).

Joan made a similar comment:

I had my son and then this is the right time for me to do something for myself at the moment. That's why I have chosen this course (Interview 1).

Danni and Sophie are two of the younger students I interviewed. Danni had dropped out of a business studies course two years before because he was 'bored' and 'wanted to travel the world'. However:

During the absence from studying, I realised I was actually wanting to go back to studying. I wanted to go back to a classroom and do something, because working in bars without any qualifications and working in this shop without any qualifications made me realise that this is not me, this is not my future. So I just decide to go back to studying to get qualifications and to make something out of myself (Interview 1).

Similarly Sophie had taken two years out of education to work:

It got to the point where I thought "I'm stuck, I need to get back into education" (Interview 1).

Zakia had interrupted her education for only a few months since, in the previous academic year, she had dropped out of an Access to Humanities course at another college. Alberto had applied for the course because he could not get onto an A level course because he was too old.

The students in this class expressed similar reasons for wishing to join the course. They had reached a point in their lives when they wished to make a change. However, Zakia and Alberto used the Access course as an alternative to other routes to higher education.

Class B

In Class B Feluga, Jose, Faisal and Valdas made a connection with re-engaging with education and their perception of themselves in relation to their working lives. For Feluga, this manifested itself in the feeling of vulnerability at a time of change at her place of employment:

I haven't got a qualification, I've worked for this company for fourteen years and as a matter of fact I have never got promoted, we had an office, we closed it down and I want to move on because it's not a secure job for me. I really want to do something that I am familiar with, business. I have to go to a lot of meetings and sometimes I feel I don't fit in. Even if you have the experience, a qualification is very important (Interview 1).

For Jose working as a waiter it was the realisation that it was time to change direction:

I've been working for a very long time and now I can't get much further if I don't have a degree. It is the right time for me, I have spare time (Interview 1).

And for Faisal:

I was finding my life going nowhere. I was going from job to job and I didn't like the jobs I was doing (factory, retail, catering) and the jobs I do want require qualifications (Interview 1).

Valdas had moved to this country 'to earn some money' but:

Very soon I realised that without proper education it is impossible to achieve your goals in your life (Interview 1).

Halice, Armita, Andre and Nadia were using the course as part of their educational journey. Halice had moved to London from Germany to continue her education because she didn't have the qualifications in that country to gain a place at university. Armita used a year away from education to 'improve my English' and make up her mind about what to do:

I felt like it's the time that is best for me and I'm ready for university (Interview 1).

Andre had been studying law at university in France but dropped out because he realised the course wasn't for him and he decided that he 'wanted to change' and through travel, 'meet people from different cultures' (Interview 1). This led him to London and, in the year before applying for Access, he studied on a course to improve his English.

Nadia was meant to do a two-year National Diploma in Business. However, she realised that because she was nineteen years of age she could apply for a shorter course:

It's too long (the National Diploma) because I'm already nineteen so I decided to try something else (Interview 1).

For half the students I interviewed in this class the need for a change in direction was associated with the need to leave jobs they were dissatisfied with. The remaining four students chose Access as a means of continuing their educational journey to university.

Both Classes

The two classes consisted of two broad categories of students. One category consisted of students who were dissatisfied with aspects of their lives with a lack of job satisfaction being a dominant theme. The other category was made up of those that were continuing their educational journey and were using Access as a vehicle for that journey. Most of the students interviewed had interrupted their education or been away from education for a while. These students have re-engaged in education to change their identity (Hall, 1990; Brine & Waller, 2004). The Access course can be seen as a 'status passage' where participation in formal learning is about making the transition from one social role to another (Gallacher *et al*, 2002).

Students' experiences on an Inner-City Access course

Habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) combine to influence the way individuals' function in social spaces such as a classroom. There is evidence that in diverse social settings students prefer to work with others like themselves and aspects of identity shape classroom practice (Pederson, 1991; Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Quintrell & Westwood, 1994; Ledwith *et al*, 1998; Brooks, 2005). In order to answer the key research question (see p.14) I analysed students' experiences at the beginning of the course, when the class was developing as a learning community and once it was fully functioning as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Wenger 1998).

Students' experiences on entry to Access

The Access course began with an induction day in September. The course team saw this as important, not just for providing students new to the college with basic information such as timetables, but it also provided an opportunity for students to meet each other:

During induction we do a team building activity so that by the time they go away on the first day they have made a friend and they come in for the start of the course and they know there will be someone they know. (Access tutor, Initial Study).

I asked students to recall what it was like for them at induction and in the first few days of the course.

Class A

In Class A Robert described his initial reaction to being in a classroom again as being 'nerve racking and horrible' (Interview 1). He associated this feeling with being away from a formal educational setting for twenty years. He also thought to himself 'I'm a student now, how do I act, how do I behave?' (Interview 1). Frederic, Lauren and Joan made the following observations:

It feels very, very strange considering your colleagues, you see all ages, young, middle-aged (Frederic, Interview 1)

It did feel funny at first, I'm looking around and I'm thinking 'Oh my God. I'm the oldest one...' (Lauren, Interview 1)

At first it was a bit strange because you can see youngsters all around. (Joan, Interview 1)

Zakia thought being in a class again was 'great'. She was comparing her 'bad experiences' from the previous college where 'everybody was much older

than me' with her view that on the Access to Business course 'everybody's almost the same age, it's sort of on the same level' (Interview 1). Sophie picked the course because she knew it would contain older students and she 'didn't want to be in a class with younger students.' (Interview 1). Danni's initial reaction to being in a classroom again was set against his earlier experience where he had dropped out of a college course:

When I left two years ago I was glad I wasn't in a classroom (but) during the absence from studying I realised I actually wanted to go back to the classroom. I actually want to study now (Interview 1).

Danni compared the make up of the class he dropped out of with the Access class and commented that 'students are older on this course' (Interview 1). Alberto 'felt strange initially, like I wasn't in the right place because I didn't know anybody' (Interview 1).

All but one of the students I interviewed in this class equated how they felt about being in a classroom again with age and age difference. The average age of the class was twenty-four. Robert, Frederic, Lauren and Joan were all over thirty at the start of the course and they felt 'out of place' and this was associated with their age in relation to the age of the other students in the class. Other students saw the composition of the class in terms of the age of their fellow students as being a positive feature. Sophie (20) was attracted to the course because she knew she would be studying with older students than she had studied with before. Zakia's (22) perception of the class was that everybody was almost the same age and this was something she was pleased with.

Class B

In this class Feluga expressed a strong desire to obtain a qualification but the reality of the classroom led to this initial reaction:

“Why am I doing this? I’m studying with students that I’m old enough to be their mother (Interview 1).

Faisal remarked that ‘being in classroom is good, I like it’ (Interview 1). Jose, felt ‘strange but in a good way’. He associated this positive feeling with having a different learner identity since school. This was linked to his desire to move on socially and economically:

Being in a classroom again is different because I am a different person. I want to study now. I am passionate and have an ambition to have a proper job (Interview 1).

Halice associated being in a classroom again with motivation, the opening up possibilities and social repositioning. Education and the acquisition of knowledge was seen as being more important than the ability to earn money:

It motivates me, because if you just work and have no education, normally you can’t speak about everything in the society and you can’t be on the same level as other people who have education; you can earn money but it’s not the same feeling as having knowledge (Interview 1).

Similarly, Armita linked her initial reaction with the possibilities the course was opening up for her:

I felt like I’m going somewhere and it’s a great experience, I mean to come back and to study again, something that leads you to more, just to know something (Interview 1).

Valdas used his educational experience in his home country to act as a point of comparison. His initial reaction was that the classroom was ‘democratic’

and that there was 'less discipline and people are more broadminded' (Interview 1). Andre, who had left university in France, noted that the Access class was 'totally different to university' (Interview 1). Finally, Nadia didn't feel that she had been away from the classroom. However, she did say that 'she felt shy' because she was 'away from all my friends and the local college where I live' (Interview 1).

In Class B, Feluga was the only student over thirty that I interviewed in this class and she expressed the feeling she was out of place. Others were positive about what the course could offer them and previous experience of education was used as a point of comparison.

Both classes

Older students from both classes expressed similar feelings. They had been away from education for a number of years and they felt 'out of place'. This may have been associated with fear of academic failure (Davies & Williams, 2001) or simply coupled with a feeling of 'otherness' related to age and age difference (Brooks, 2005). Of the remaining students in both classes initial reactions were positive and were either set against their earlier experiences and/or in relation to their expectations for the educational journey they were about to set on. Danni (Class A) and Jose (Class B) linked their positive feelings with a changed attitude towards education and that it was now the right time to study. Halice and Armita's (both Class B) responses suggest their attitude was associated with the potential the course offered. Early experiences of being in a classroom again are bound up with students'

identities. Older students juxtaposed their mature identity with that of their younger peers. Age and age difference dominated their feelings at this formative time. A number of other students had established learner identities that meant that they were now ready to re-engage with education with a positive attitude towards what lay before them. Others saw the course as a 'status passage' where participation in formal learning is about making the transition from one social role to another (Gallacher *et al*, 2002).

Forming communities of learning

Induction included teambuilding activities that were designed to introduce students to the course's cooperative ethos and offered the opportunity for students to begin the process of getting to know each other. Teambuilding involved teachers organising the way students interacted with each other through 'ice-breakers'. These involved structured interactions. However, following induction, students were free to sit and work with whom they like; their interactions were governed by their own impulses. This puts the onus on class members to form working relationships with others. Working relationships begin with individuals making decisions about whom they will interact with in the classroom and I asked the students about this phase of the course.

Class A

In this class Alberto reflected on how the group he worked with formed and suggested that 'It just happened, that's where we [the group he belongs to] sat when we first started' (Interview 2). Lauren made a similar point by

suggesting that 'groups just happen' (Interview 2). She had formed a working relationship with Joan and, reflecting on how their relationship started commented that 'I think we just ended up sitting next to each other' (interview 2). Joan, thinking back to the same incident concurred:

There were some people already in the classroom and I sat in the middle where one other person (Lauren) was there (Interview 2).

At induction, Frederic had sat with Robert and he found that he got on well with him. He put this down to 'age and of course maturity' (Interview 2). However, he soon realised that he would need to find others to work with:

One thing I've learnt is it's not good to put all your eggs in one basket. It's sometimes better to try and get to know, to get on well with everybody. I feel like Robert was supposed to be my friend but I got very little from him. The areas that I'm good at, he's around me. But where I am not and he is, he will go somewhere else and share with people that are on the same level as him (Interview 2).

Once Frederic realised that his relationship with Robert wasn't contributing towards his studies he began working with Joan.

Sophie talked about meeting up with those that were like 'people that I was already used to', 'like my friends' in terms of 'race, age and outlook' (Interview 2). As well as age being a factor in determining whom she should make initial contact with, it also acted as a barrier to interaction:

I didn't approach the older ones. If I were an old person I wouldn't want to be chatting to a younger person. In my home background you really have to respect someone that's older, like they're your auntie or uncle, there's that level of respect that you can't talk to them anyhow. So when you see someone in your classroom that's the same age you feel a bit like you can't say certain things to them (Interview 1).

However, after a short period of time:

I moved to front of class to get away from being distracted by my friends in the class – they are good students but when we get together we chat. (I then) sat with Robert and Frederic – they just want to work (Interview 2).

Danni referred to his class as having 'an older and younger section' and age related groups formed because of their respective views and understandings (Danni, Class A, Interview 2). Joan referred to Lauren and Frederic as making up her group and she commented that they are 'mature, like me' (Interview 2). Zakia, however, did not see herself as belonging to any group in the class and stated that 'I work on my own mostly' (Interview 2).

Students in this class suggested that initial interaction and group formation was either governed by chance/circumstance or drew on aspects of identity. In particular, age and age difference appeared to act as a factor in the way interactions were structured. However, Frederic and Sophie were prepared to move away from friends to associate with those who they felt would support their learning and Zakia preferred to study independently.

Class B

In Class B Feluga formed a working relationship with another student because she 'had the same background and the age gap is not that much' (Feluga, Interview 1). Although Feluga made a reference to age she also acknowledged this was not necessarily a barrier to interaction:

It's not age it's maturity. Armita, she's young but she is very mature and you can get on easily with her (Feluga, Interview 2).

Valdas had teamed up with a number of students and I asked him what led him to work with them:

The formation of this group happened because of one factor, attitude towards studies, and you know, I'm not saying that we are the best but at the beginning of the year we had really a really serious attitude and this attitude remains (Interview 2).

Armita, another of this group, reflecting on what drew her to these particular students talked of 'experience outside the college, the way they look in the face, pretty much the same as me maybe' (Interview 1). She elaborated on the factors that draw people together:

You start trying to find out that the sort of people you can hang around or work with (Interview 1).

Armita also put a broader perspective on group formation within the class as a whole and the criteria she applied to her own decision as to who to work with:

You see it as in little groups. From the beginning of the year you just saw the way they are and the ones that are really matching up. I was attracted by the level of thinking about our studies. We all have the same way of studying and being a student. I think all four of us have more or less the same understanding about studying and being a student and just getting the grades. When you're sticking with a small group you can use then to help you catch up if you miss (Interview 2).

Referring to her class, Armita talked of a 'small division, like who works, who hangs around' (Interview 1). Jose, another member of the group suggested that its formation 'just happened'. However, he also recognised that the group formed overtime and was the product of making a conscious choice about who to work with:

I sat with Andre [who is French] originally because I have a lot of French friends but he talks too much. Also Faisal, but he's always asking stupid questions. I noticed Valdas and he seemed more serious. We then all started working together (Interview 2).

At first Jose sat and worked with Andre and Faisal but then moved to sit and work with Valdas because he was perceived as serious, that is, he had an approach to his studies that accorded with his own. Interestingly Faisal, mentioned by Jose above, commented that he worked with 'those who are committed' (Interview 2) and referred to Valdas and Jose as being students he associated himself with. Nadia didn't feel that she had got support from her fellow students and Halice commented that:

Originally I sat with girls my age but I didn't feel comfortable with them. They are not the same type of people and we are just very different (in our view of) how important the course is. I tend to work on my own now (Interview 2).

For the students in Class B, age and nationality were amongst the factors influencing interaction. However, attitude and common approaches to study appeared to dominate the responses. It was also noticeable that Halice and Nadia did not see themselves as interacting with others in this class.

Both classes

The evidence collected from the interviews suggests that identity had a part to play in shaping the way students interacted and the way groups formed in the class. However, in Class A reference was made to chance/circumstance. In both classes students referred to different aspects of identity. Age and age difference was referred to as were other visible manifestations of identity.

Respondents in both classes cited commitment and attitudes towards study although there was a particular emphasis on this from the Class B students. Both classes contained students who worked on their own.

Fully functioning learning communities

I analysed students' responses to learn how identity affected classroom practice and the way the classroom functioned as a community of learning. For each class age, nationality/ethnicity and other sources of identity were explored.

Class A

In this class Joan (31 years old) commented on the relationship between age, behaviour and the effect this had on her:

Sometimes I get a bit annoyed, especially when these youngsters try and interrupt and take up time because I'm here to concentrate and try to take something and then they have their issues and all this (Interview 1).

Robert (40) made a similar comment:

Younger students compete with each other, try to challenge tutors, try their patience (Interview 2).

Joan and Robert associated unacceptable behaviour with students younger than them. However, commenting on a related aspect of classroom practice, Alberto (20) made a similar observation about these students:

Some of my classmates come late, some don't come and they don't hand course work in on time. They do the work in class but when it comes to course work, I've found they don't do anything; they go downstairs and play table tennis or pool (Interview 1).

However, there was an acknowledgement that having young people in the class can be positive. It can make 'you feel young as well' (Joan, Interview 1) and it was noted that younger students can use their superior knowledge of information technology to support older students (Alberto, Interview 2). Frederic, another of the older students in this class, had a different take on the issue. He felt that the 'age gap hasn't had any effect at all' and commented that 'it's not age, it's maturity' (Interview 1).

Other aspects of identity led students to making a number of observations. Frederic subverted difference by emphasising the common interest of the learning community as a whole:

It doesn't matter, Black, White, Asian, from Africa, from Eastern Europe, from here, wherever. I do believe that each and every one of us can come from all these places, but we have the same behaviour. We can be able to work together and achieve a goal, which is what most people want (Interview 2).

Zakia recognised the value of classroom diversity:

It does really help because that is what I'm used to. In London I'm used to being around different types of people. If I lived outside London I don't know how I would cope (Interview 2).

However, the July 7th 200 terrorist incident made her aware of her identity as a Muslim because of the reaction of one particular woman who was staring at her and her bag whilst she was travelling on the tube. I wanted to know about her experience of the college in relation to her religious identity and the public discourse that equates Islam with terrorism:

Interviewer: What about in the college? Has it been like that?

Zakia: No, in the college nobody cares. You know what I mean. I'm sure they know like we have nothing to do with it. For one thing I would have expected it to happen in a college because you know they're all young and the comments can be thrown about but they're much more smart like than the older...

Interviewer: Oh so you think that because they're younger, they're more tolerant.

Zakia: Yeah, not only that, they can think for themselves. They can think "Okay, that's what the media are saying..." (Interview 2).

With regard to the Access class, Zakia did feel the need to speak to the students about her identity:

They can visually see I am religious; I've made it clear to them, "You know you don't have to feel like you aren't allowed to ask me certain things because I'm like this, I'm a human being you know at the end of the day, like I would understand". So now they joke, they say little things and I'm fine with it (Interview 1).

Sophie and Danni saw national, ethnic and religious difference as positive:

You've got people from Brazil, from Russia, you've got Muslims...I would never have thought I would be able to get on with such people and make learning so enjoyable (Sophie, Interview 2).

Because of different backgrounds, different cultures, different ways of thinking, different ways of talking. It helps because every person brings different ideas (Danni, Interview 1).

Diversity was seen as a valuable resource on the programme:

Especially for European and International Business, everyone has different experiences from their country (Danni, Interview 1).

Alberto also cited this module and another, Economics and remarked on the fact that in these subjects there were different views being aired:

Let's say for instance Danni, he always has the Soviet view. He keeps saying the Soviet Union (sic) is going to join the EU one day and then we have (names a student) and some people from Africa, they see things differently (Interview 1).

And he also commented that:

It's very good to hear people's views. I was talking in Economics about farming and some of the other students have experienced some of the things we were talking about (Interview 1).

Particular learner identities also helped to structure students' interactions. Where a student was perceived as having good knowledge, understanding and skills that person became a resource for others:

Doing certain lessons you don't know what you're doing and then you ask a student that understands it more than you and they're willing to help and you know explain things to you as well. (Lauren, Interview 1).

Zakia's independent identity meant she was able to approach anybody in the class when looking for support:

If I don't understand something I can easily walk to somebody else and ask them (Interview 1).

She would approach 'anybody' but the decision would be constrained by how she perceived the learner identities of the students in the class:

Interviewer: And is this anybody in the class?

Zakia: Anybody else, well those who get it I go to, there's ones who don't get it at all, like the whole year round, they just don't understand (Interview 1).

Zakia was also willing to support others but this support was conditional and she saw that there were costs associated with such support:

If they have a good excuse about why they didn't understand it I would say, "Okay" but if they were talking in class I'll be like "Well forget it" (Interview 2).

When I'm asked for help I tend to leave what I am doing and explain and then I realise I just spent all my time explaining it to the other student (Interview 2).

The relationship between age and classroom practice was raised by the students in this class. Diversity in terms of nationality and ethnicity was seen as benefitting the life of the classroom. Additionally, learner identity structured classroom interactions.

Class B

Students in this class also referred to the age of students and the relationship between relative youth and attitudes towards their studies:

They just come because they have to come. They arrive late sometimes; it feels like they don't really bother to do anything or maybe they're in the wrong place I think. I'm the same age as them but their behaviour is not acceptable at times (Armita, Interview 1).

One student didn't think it was a good thing 'to have so many different ages' (Halice, Interview 1) but Armita disagreed:

I think it's a good idea that it's mix of sort of different ages. If you put all the people the same age, for example like teenagers, all teenagers like me, like 19 or young people, 19, in one class and some of them, I suppose they would behave like loud persons and would have bad attitudes and it wouldn't be good (Interview 1)

Other aspects of identity were cited by Halice who saw diversity as 'normal' (Interview 2) and Armita commented:

It's a good experience to see other people how they work and just to have sort of influence from others as well. I would say like if you are from an Eastern European country people are used to work harder you know. They're used to pressure (Interview 2).

Faisal referred to a television advert for a bank that made reference to the importance of having knowledge of local cultural practices:

You get people from all over the world and you know you might see a thing from a certain point of view but somebody else might see something from a different point of view. This is what business involves (Interview 2).

He also saw the value of national diversity in relation to certain aspects of the business studies curriculum:

Especially European Business, Economics, because you know people are from third world countries, people are from Western countries and that reflects in the classroom. You can see how, you can hear someone's opinion that actually lived in a third world (sic) country (Interview 1).

In Class B age and nationality identity was referred to in relation to classroom practice.

Both Classes

Identity and the categories of identity that are used to describe difference had an impact on the way the class functioned as a learning community. Observations from students from both classes cited age, or more particularly relative youth, as being associated with certain patterns of behaviour that had an impact on both classes. Students, young and old, identified younger students as having behaviour that was seen as unacceptable. However, relative youth and age difference was seen as bringing benefits to the

classroom. Other aspects of identity were also seen as having an impact upon classroom practice. Students in Class A in particular remarked upon the benefits they saw in being part of a diverse student body. They recognised that students from different countries, even though they may have lived a number of years in this country, bring with them a range of experiences that can be seen as a resource to support and enhance learning. In Class B, Armita drew on the discourse of 'hardworking Eastern Europeans' to suggest that having such students in the class can act as a good example to others. Learners' recognised that having students from different countries provided insights from personal experience that brought instrumental advantages to the classroom. Attitudes towards study acted as factor in the formation of groups within each class.

Student dropout: perspectives, perceptions and identity

Retention and dropout formed an important part of the Initial Study and although the research moved on to take on a wider perspective I had still collected qualitative data about this issue. The reasons why students drop out has been described as complex, multiple and inter-related (Martinez & Munday, 1998) and there has been extensive research into the phenomenon (see p.19-25). The limitations of my research meant I was unable to collect sufficient data to explore the issue further by offering an explanation of the differences in rates of dropout between the two Access classes. However, my research did afford me the opportunity to answer one of the research questions (p.14) by exploring the relationship between individual identity and attitudes towards student dropout.

To set the context for an analysis of students' attitudes I want to explore what the two Access tutors had to say about the phenomenon. Tutors hold positions of power and thus the ability to influence discourse on educational issues. Attitudes and behaviour towards 'at risk' students can affect the perceptions of others, including continuing students. Helen, the current Access to Business tutor, reflected on the issue and commented that:

Well, it is obvious there is no one reason and often reasons are quite complex and there are multiple reasons (Helen, Initial Study).

And:

One of the things that I have learnt, maybe to mention this as an issue, is that some of them have been out of an educational situation for 5, 10, 15 even 20 years, and they don't really know how to go about completing the assignments. We take it for granted that they know that they have to complete certain things, but some of them don't even know how to begin. I think sometimes we forget that we need to make sure that they know how to learn - it's study skills, they need to know how to approach something (Helen, Initial Study).

And, warming to her theme:

You can say that it is a very intensive course and that it is a lot of work but they don't know what that means. They have no conception of it, they have no idea what it is like until they actually do it and I think that is a reason why some of them dropout (the withdrawn students say) 'this (the course) is a lot more than I thought it would be (Helen, Initial Study).

She recognised that students were confronted with outside pressures and lack of resources:

There are financial reasons, they can't afford not to work and some do not have any parental support or anything like that and then there is the issue of those who are on benefits and the amount of hours that they are allowed to study (Helen, Initial Study).

I conducted a meeting with Helen as part of the Initial Study and each of the ten withdrawn students from the 2004/5 Access to Business course was considered in turn and, for all of them, external factors were cited. One had left to take up a university place and another had been persuaded to go on a 'once in a lifetime' world cruise with his uncle. Two women had child-care and or health issues to contend with. One student was living in a hostel, had a child to look after and was on Job Seekers Allowance. A male student had unexpectedly moved to Birmingham and 'had many problems' and another had outside interests (he was a 'rap' artist) that conflicted with the requirements of the course. Another mature male student had a difficult journey to college and worked 20 hours a week and the final student for which reasons were 'known' had decided that 'business studies wasn't for him' and he intended to switch his study to the arts. Katie, the former Access to Computing tutor put forward a number of suggestions:

The ones that leave tend to be the ones that haven't gelled into the group so I think being part of the group is really important (Katie, Initial Study).

She also noted that:

Some of them are working, working in restaurants till three in the morning and they just can't cope (Katie, Initial Study).

The tutors offered a variety of reasons that focused on dropout being associated with particular individuals lacking certain characteristics/forms of

capital to function effectively in their new role as a student. Turning to the students, I want to analyse their attitudes towards dropout and the relationship between these attitudes and learner identity. In a study by Armstrong (1996) persisting Access students were asked why they thought their fellow Access students had dropped out. They cited student characteristics, external constraints and institutional failings. Having examined tutors' attitudes I can now turn to those of the students:

Class A

In this class Lauren commented:

I think some people just come in and are not serious about it. There could be genuine reasons but the ones that just come in and mess about and then you know what's the point? They come in like one day or for one lesson and you don't see them for the rest of the day you know and you think, "What's that all about?" (Interview 2).

Frederic put the phenomenon down to students 'lack of self-confidence' and not being 'really committed'. However, drawing on his own experience, Frederic also acknowledged that 'it might not be their fault' because circumstances can intervene to prevent continuing on a course (Interview 2). Making a similar point, Joan speculated that it was:

Because they try to do two things or more than you know in one time like some of them, they're working and they're doing the course, it's not you know. It's not practical (Interview 2).

Joan also thought that for some students 'it's not the right thing now' and 'for youngsters there are more distractions' (Interview 2). Danni suggested that the students who had dropped out didn't take their studies 'seriously'. He also suggested that one particular student was on the course to 'stay on benefits'

and another for social reasons (Interview 2). Alberto had observed the behaviour of some of his fellow students and noted:

Some students, they come in, they don't even bother to their work or come to the classroom; they play pool downstairs or something. I think it's about selecting the right students at the beginning of the year (Interview 2).

Zakia and Sophie recognised something in their former selves when reflecting on the reasons for their fellow students dropping out:

Some people are just lazy. They go out the night before and they can't be bothered to get up. I know that's how I used be so I can sort of relate to it. (Zakia, Interview 2).

I would probably have done the same. When you're out of education for a long time you get used to being lazy (Sophie, Interview 2).

Class B

In this class Feluga thought that students dropped out because:

They were on the wrong course, it was too hard for them. It's not an easy course, especially for somebody who's been away from studies for so long (Interview 2).

Jose suggested that 'they just choose this course to do something' (Interview 2). Another remarked:

I don't think they (the withdrawn students) are stupid, they just don't have fire. Personally, I think that it's got nothing to do with the college, it's about setting a goal and achieving (Valdas, Interview 2).

Faisal and Amita also absolved the college/course of responsibility for student dropout by making the following observations:

They leave because of personal problems, a lack of motivation and a lack of commitment. You can't change the individual, you need to find individuals who are committed and motivated (Faisal, Interview 2).

I think the course is designed properly to get people ready for university, it's just that the students need more motivation (Armita, Interview 2).

Both Classes

The three older students I interviewed In Class A all recognised the possibility that students might have to withdraw because they had no choice. Reasons could be 'genuine' (Lauren, Interview 2); circumstances could intervene to force early withdrawal (Frederic, Interview 2) or students could be taking too much on (Joan, Interview 2). Similarly, in Class B, Feluga (40) thought it was because they were on the wrong course (Interview 2). These responses suggest that the reason students withdraw is, at least in part, to do with circumstances beyond the students' control. Dropout is not linked to flaws in the identities of the learners. The other students I interviewed in the two classes were all younger. They equated poor motivation, lack of commitment, absenteeism, lateness and laziness to flaws in the withdrawn students' learner identities. External constraints and institutional failings were not mentioned as possible reasons by any of the respondents.

Additional evidence:

Recruitment practice and the shaping of learning communities

So far in this chapter I have attempted to analysis the data collected to address the key research question and sub-questions (p.14). However, the catalyst for my research was the difference in performance in terms of student

dropout and effectiveness between Class A and Class B, and why our students dropped out (see p.71-73). I had collected data on this issue as part of the Initial Study from the two Access tutors I had interviewed (see p.73-75). When interviewing the students for the Main Study I was not looking for their views on whether there was a difference in the two classes. However, if the issue was raised during the interview I did pursue the subject. The two classes were separately timetabled and thus there were limited opportunities for the two sets of students to meet or observe each other. However, there was limited interaction, and as a consequence views were formed about the difference between the two classes.

Tutors

Helen, the Access to business teacher noted a difference between the two classes and suggested:

Class B find themselves in a new situation, fairly new, a lot of them don't have a family here, whereas Class A already have certain friends, maybe in college or maybe outside of college so college life is possibly not as important to them as it was to Class B. We did try to get Class A together but they were not as willing as Class B were. Class A were not as cohesive (Initial Study interview).

I described the nature of the intakes of the two classes to Katie, an experienced former Access tutor and she speculated about the cohesive nature of Class B:

I think that it might be that the college and the course gives them an identity and something that can make them feel that they belong here, whereas for the others, it maybe that there is something else going on in their lives, they've got their friends, they are set up in London and

they are not too worried about staying on the course (Katie, Access tutor, Initial Study interview).

The evidence from the Access tutors was that the difference between the two groups is related to the identities of the students that comprise them.

Students

Class A

Danni had got to know students in the other Access to Business class and had observed their practice. As a consequence he observed:

The other class looks more civilised and they're ahead of our class. I think they are people that just come to this country and they want to do well. A lot of people are determined to learn English and achieve something because they did not have the chance in their own country (Interview 2).

Class B

Jose referred to an incident in the library when he was working with a number of other students in his class:

And we came out with the solutions and then when one of the guys from Class A came over and said "Oh, this is nice you know, this doesn't happen in our group" (Interview 2).

The students are visited at the end of the first semester by an external moderator appointed by the Access programme's awarding body. During this moderation the two classes come together. Armita remarked on the behaviour of the students in Class A:

The way they behaving, all of them, they just, they don't have any influence from no-one else. They just keep their attitudes between

them. This moderator came in and then he left and all of us like two groups stayed and you can see the attitudes of two different groups and our group attitude was totally different from the people from *A group* and I think 'Okay, so A group, why are they behaving like that I mean...

Interviewer: What were they doing?

Armita: Being loud and noisy and things like that and I think because they're all being the same like in the same attitude (Interview 2).

This led her to suggest that:

You can see that foreign speakers even though their second language is English, they're working even harder and they're doing better than the ones who's speaking English as a first language (Interview 2).

Both classes

Only one student in Class A and two in Class B commented on the difference between the two classes. From this limited evidence there was a perception that Class B is 'better' than Class A.

Tutor and students

The tutor and students from both classes perceived that there was a difference between the two classes. This difference is manifested in the way the two classes function as communities of learning and the extent to which their behaviour is appropriate. Respondents suggested that Class B functioned more effectively as a learning community and this was rooted in the individual identities of the students. Students from Class B have identities that meant that their behaviour and attitudes accorded more closely with the discourse and practices of the Access to Business programme.

Summary

I have attempted to answer the research questions (see p.14) by carrying out a comparative analysis of the data collected. I looked for similarities and differences between Class A and Class B and these have been summarised below:

Access, student background and educational engagement

To set the context for the study of students' experiences and to investigate the extent to which the Access to Business course was attracting students under-represented in higher education I examined their background and reasons for (re)engaging in education. The classes were similar in terms of the family and educational backgrounds. A majority of the students in both classes were in possession of habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1984) that normalises participation in post-compulsory education. However, Class A had more students who were members of groups Access was designed to attract (see p.7). The course did not attract White British underachievers. Reasons given for joining the Access course was similar. Within both classes there were two broad categories of students. One category consisted of students that were dissatisfied with aspects of their lives. The other was made up of students who were continuing their educational journey.

How students from diverse backgrounds experience learning

Similar reactions in the two classes to being in a classroom again emerged from the findings. Early experiences of being in a classroom again were bound up with students' identities. Older students juxtaposed their mature

identity with that of their younger peers. Age and age difference dominated their feelings at this formative time. A number of other students had established learner identities that meant that they were now ready to re-engage with education with a positive attitude towards what lay before them. Others saw the course as a 'status passage' where participation in formal learning is about making the transition from one social role to another (Gallacher *et al*, 2002).

Similarities were found between the two classes in the way the students initially interacted and the way groups formed within each class. Visible manifestations of identity helped to influence early interactions in both classes. Both classes had students who didn't see themselves as working with others. However, there was a greater focus on age and age difference from the students in Class A than Class B and this latter class put a greater emphasise on commitment and attitudes towards study as factors determining who interacted with who.

Respondents from both classes used aspects of identity to describe the way the classes operated once fully functioning as learning communities. Age and age difference were cited as factors that affected the classroom. Younger students were seen as having an adverse impact on learning. Other aspects of diversity were seen as having a positive benefit. Being in a classroom with students from different countries and cultures were seen to support learning.

Groups formed within each class and attitudes towards study contributed towards their membership. This phenomenon was most marked in Class B.

Student dropout: perspectives, perceptions and identity

In both classes the older students thought that students dropped out because of circumstances outside their control. Their observations were similar to the Access tutors' views. Younger students associated dropout with flaws in the withdrawn students' learner identities. The research did not produce fresh insights into the phenomenon.

Recruitment practice and the shaping of learning communities

Recruitment practice affected the composition of the two classes (see p.9). Students from both classes and the Access tutor suggested Class A functioned more effectively than Class B and this was rooted in the students' learner identities.

Issues that have emerged

The research, evidence collected and analysis have led to the emergence of a number of issues related to policy and practice:

Access and targeting under-represented groups

The evidence suggested that the Access to Business course only enrolled a minority of students belonging to groups the course was designed to attract (see p.7). One particular group underrepresented was White British students

from deprived backgrounds. Most students were in possession of habitus and the forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1976) that normalised educational participation.

Identity and classroom practice

Evidence from the research showed that aspects of identity played a part in the shaping of classroom practice. Age and age difference had an impact on how students experienced the early stages of the course and once the course was fully functioning as a learning community. Visible manifestations of identity shaped early interactions but there was also evidence that students' attitudes towards study also helped to determine who worked with whom. Aspects of identity and diversity were identified as contributing towards learning and classroom practice. Students' attitudes towards study affected the membership of groups with each class.

Recruitment practice

Recruitment practice led to the two classes having different intakes and differential performance.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to answer the research questions (p.14) by analysing the data collected. My next task is to evaluate the data and it is to that I turn to next.

Chapter Six

Data Evaluation

Introduction

Having analysed the data in the previous chapter I now want to carry out an evaluation of this data. My intention is to draw on the literature review in general and the strands of the theoretical framework in particular to assess the contribution the analysis may make to improving Access policy and practice. I will follow the structure of the previous chapter and thus attempt to offer an insight into how learners from diverse backgrounds experience being students on an Access to Higher education course. The chapter begins with an examination of students' backgrounds. This will help to address the question of the extent to which the Access to Business course at Inner-London College fulfills its mission to attract members of groups from societal groups underrepresented in higher education (see p.7). Because it deals with aspects of student identity it will also help to set the context for an examination of the relationship between diversity, experience and classroom participation and practice. The chapter continues with an assessment of how students from diverse backgrounds experience learning in an inner London college. It then explores attitudes towards student dropout before examining the effect that recruitment practice has shaping learning communities. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings and an outline of the issues that have emerged from the research.

Access, student background and educational engagement

In the previous chapter I analysed students' family and educational backgrounds and reasons why they decided to (re)engage in education. I did this to set the context for investigating the key question (see p.14) and to determine the extent to which the course attracted students from underrepresented groups (see p.7).

According to the Qualification Assurance Agency for Higher Education 'Access courses are targeted, in particular, at groups which are under-represented in HE' (QAA, 2007). The 'targeting' of individuals that belong to particular groups in society is elaborated elsewhere:

Access programmes are often targeted at those groups identified as under-represented in HE, in particular, disabled learners, the unemployed, women returners, minority ethnic groups and those from socio-economic group backgrounds where entry to HE is not traditional (QAA, 2007).

Targeting suggests aiming at members of the groups identified above. For an individual to know that they are subject to targeting requires knowledge of the course and of how to negotiate the joining process. Details of the course are publicised through the College website and prospectus. Information can also be obtained from the London Open College Network. In September, just before the course is due to start, the local area is leafleted and adverts go out on local radio stations publicising the college and courses in general. During the year prior to the start of the course application forms are collected and individuals are invited in for interview and are asked to carry out a diagnostic test. An individual who meets the criteria (minimum age, appropriate level of

literacy and status, without qualifications needed for higher education) will be offered a place and asked to enrol in September when fees are paid.

Provided individuals, who make themselves available, fulfil the basic age and literacy requirement and do not already have the qualifications required by higher education, will be accepted onto the course. Targeting by the college and course is essentially a passive and reactive exercise; quotas of members from the different under-represented groups are not sought out and this puts the onus on individuals to become the 'target', to identify the opportunities and proactively engage in the process of participation. Embarking on an Access course means committing to a minimum of four years of study and, in a post-compulsory setting, commitment begins with making the decision to investigate the possibilities and pursue them. Tinto (1975) sees family background, personal attributes and pre-college schooling as being factors that shape student commitment to their studies and whilst habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984) can help to explain how students function within an educational setting these concepts can also help to explain the nature of the student intake; the way it is composed of members from different groups but that there is commonality across these groups. There is also evidence that participation in post-compulsory education is associated with prior educational success and economic mobility (Courtney, 1992).

I want to draw on the concepts of habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984) to suggest that many, but not all, of the students have backgrounds that allow them to consider the possibility of re-engaging with education. I don't believe

that it is possible to quantify or measure habitus and the non-economic forms of capital but that does not mean that they aren't there; parental education, performance and the nature of their attitudes towards education will indicate the presence of a particular habitus and forms of capital. These 'resources' are embodied in individuals and shape their identity and actions but because human beings are more than just ciphers and have agency it is not possible to predict in a quantifiable way how individuals might behave given access to particular resources. However this does not mean that there is no influence.

Evidence from my research shows that the course has been colonised by individuals who are in possession of, or have access to, the right kind of resources (habitus and forms of capital) necessary to contemplate four years of study in a post-compulsory setting. Many have family members who have been to university and all know friends who are at university or have had experience of higher education. Even where individuals can be described as members of under-represented groups they have been able to draw on social support and personal attributes to consider the possibility of educational engagement. This is particularly noticeable when looking at the experiences of those I interviewed in Class A where five interviewees can be described as being members of under-represented groups. Robert and Lauren were able to draw on the higher education experience of others in their social circle. Before Lauren started the course she talked to someone in her social circle:

I asked my friend "Can I do this?" and she said "Of course you can, if I can, so can you" (Lauren, Class A, Interview 1).

Here Lauren was able to draw on an existing social resource (a 'significant other') to overcome her trepidation associated with her background and previous experience of education. Although Sophie's parents had not been to university they had stressed the importance of education to their children and Alberto had done well at school gaining good GCSEs. Zakia's background, on the face of it, is the least promising (see p.94). However, her biography reveals how individuals can overcome diversity to negate disadvantage. The remaining students I interviewed in Class A, Frederic, Joan and Danni, were all born abroad from backgrounds that can be characterised as privileged. Similarly, all but one of the students I interviewed in Class B had one or more parents that had been to university and had educational backgrounds that would act as a resource to support engagement in higher education.

Where particular types of student take up all the places available on a 'first come first served basis' others will be denied the educational opportunities afforded by the course. One particular group that was not attracted to the course was White British students from disadvantaged backgrounds (see p.97). The education system is not one that is socially and culturally neutral but one that is biased; educational institutions have their own habitus (Thomas, 2002) and social class impacts upon what educational routes are seen as possible (Archer & Leathwood, 2003). Issues of identity are central to the differential ways in which people from different social classes negotiate educational systems and they impact upon what educational routes are seen as possible. Being a member of a particular societal group can close off options for engagement in post-compulsory education where that group has

not aligned itself with a discourse that normalises educational engagement. Furthermore, where that group has viable alternatives through access to particular forms of social capital, social capital can inhibit participation where community support is seen as an alternative to and preferable to engagement in formal institutions (Field & Spence, 2000). Although, among those over nineteen, the largest ethnic group represented at Inner-London College is White British (32%) this is about half of what would be expected if it was representative of the College's catchment area as a whole. Inner-London College might be seen as 'other' by members of certain groups within the ethnic majority. If we look at the college's overall Access provision it can be seen that 25% of the students enrolled in 2005/6 were classified as White British and nearly all of these students were on the Clinical Physiology and Humanities programmes. This suggests that just as educational institutions have their own habitus (Thomas, 2002) it can also be argued that particular subjects and/or courses of study have their own habitus that structures the composition of particular cohorts.

In the discussion above I have argued that the Access to Business course attracts a majority of students from backgrounds that normalises participation in post-compulsory education and fails to attract members of particular groups, in particular, members of the British white working-class. However, there is a danger in accepting the argument that simply because someone has been recruited onto the course they must almost, *by definition*, be in possession of the right kind of economic and social resources that privileges them; that there is a process of self-selection that shuts off opportunities for

those who really should be re-engaging in education through the Access route. However, I want to argue that this is unduly pessimistic. The course does attract a number of students who meet the criteria set out for Access programmes. Lauren, for example, is British, has an Afro-Caribbean background, left school at fifteen and is a mature single parent. Her friend's influence in encouraging her to return to study does not invalidate her 'status' as a member of a group Access is looking to target.

With respect to the other students, many have come from countries other than Britain and they have been attracted to this country for social, economic and educational reasons either directly or because they came to London with their families. Inner-London College's location means that it is in a position to attract such students. Educational programmes evolve over time and that includes the nature of the students courses attract. Access programmes can be seen as a way to counter structural inequalities in society that leads to members of certain groups being under-represented in higher education. The assumption underpinning this aim is that such courses are targeted at members of disadvantaged groups in this country and not a repository for members of less-disadvantaged groups from other countries. However, this ignores the obligations that British institutions have through membership of the European Union and the additional fees non-EU citizens have to pay to the College to enrol on the course. All those entitled to live; work and study in this country have legitimate claims to publicly funded resources including access to post-compulsory education. For the individuals who have gained a place on the course it provides an opportunity for change, to reposition

themselves economically. The course opens up possibilities and new challenges and this is a valuable goal in its own right. Notwithstanding these arguments I still believe the course can be criticised for not attracting enough students like Lauren and for recruiting too many students whose backgrounds give them an advantage, even though, for them, there is no alternative to Access as a route to higher education. The solution is not to deny access to these students but to expand the intake. Strategies need to be found to engage with hard to reach groups such as the indigenous white working class and I discuss this issue in the following chapter.

Reasons for (re)engaging in education

Students on Access courses are involved in changing their identities (Brine & Waller, 2004) and becoming a mature student can be understood as part of a continuous process of identity construction (Britton & Baxter, 1999). Change and construction involves making conscious choices about what practical action to take and this becomes embodied in to the identity of the individual. At the base of an understanding of the lived experiences of the students as they re-embark on their educational journey will be an understanding of the circumstances and motivations that led them to the starting gate at this time in their lives.

Where students had interrupted their education for a few or more years they referred to the time being right for them (see p.99/100). This was particularly noticeable with the older students but not exclusively so. For these students there was no evidence of casual re-engagement with education but one

where joining the course was a significant event in their lives. In Class A Robert and Frederic were dissatisfied with their current circumstances and saw the time as being right to advance and change direction. Lauren and Joan equated their decision to study again with the opportunity afforded by no longer having to prioritise bringing up children and therefore being able to do something for themselves. They could only draw on the discourse of self-fulfilment once they had discharged their responsibilities implicit in a discourse of self-sacrifice. Although Danni and Sophie had been only out of education for a relatively short time their experience of employment left them unfulfilled and they associated this feeling with their lack of higher level qualifications. In Class B Feluga, Jose, Faisal and Valdas all referred to dissatisfaction with their working lives and education was seen as the solution to achieving self-fulfilment. For the remaining students the Access course was less an opportunity for transformation (Mezirow, 1991) after a period away from education and more an option that could be drawn on as part of an ongoing (even if for some there was an interruption) educational journey.

A common thread running through many of the narratives from both classes is the desire to construct a changed identity through education. This can be seen as a response to dissatisfaction with aspects of their current identity. For a number of respondents in both classes this was bound up with the relationship between self and the nature of their employment or job status. Although some of the respondents stayed in employment, their relationship with these jobs changed, as it became an adjunct to their new identity as a student.

How students from diverse backgrounds experience learning

Students' experiences will be influenced by habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). There is evidence that in diverse social settings students prefer to work with others like themselves and aspects of identity shape classroom practice (Pederson, 1991; Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Quintrell & Westwood, 1994; Ledwith *et al*, 1998; Brooks, 2005). I analysed how the Access to Business students experienced the course at entry, once the classes were forming into communities of learning and then as fully functioning learning communities.

Student experiences on entry to Access

Aspects of identity will influence how students experience the first few days of the course. However, Inner-London College and the Access to Business course team have a role in structuring and shaping the way staff and students interact with each other. Those enrolled are divided into two separately timetabled classes and each class has its own induction day. Induction was important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it began the process of conferring on individuals' an identity as a student. Although students 'describe their identities as multifaceted' (Shaw, 1999:169) having such an identity 'provides a boundary against which other demands can be defended' (Edwards, 1997:129). Secondly, induction provided an early opportunity for the course team to introduce to students to the course. The cooperative discourse of the Access programme was articulated and reified in the programme literature that was distributed to the students at this formative stage. It was also applied in a practical sense through ice-breaker activities

that encouraged cooperative learning, requiring 'students to cooperate with each other as they learn' (Petty, 2006:150). This discourse was the context within which students have to negotiate their transition to a formal setting. Earlier research has shown that this transition can be negotiated more or less effectively (Gallacher *et al*, 2000) and the evidence from my study supports this contention. The students I interviewed for this project suggested that they had embarked on the course in order to construct for themselves a changed identity (Brine & Waller, 2004; Britton & Baxter, 1999). They had embarked on their journey by researching their options, contacting the college, attending an interview and successfully completing an initial assessment. However, although respondents had similar reasons for enrolling on the course their reactions differed and this difference was linked to age of each student (see p.102). The older students expressed feelings of discomfort about being in a classroom again. This discomfort was associated with their age and their perception of the age of others in the class. This suggests that at the beginning of the course the intergenerational classroom is not seen as being normal, it is instead seen as 'strange'. This might be a reaction to the time away from the classroom and how they remember what a classroom 'should' be like or how they see their generational identity in relation to the rest of the class. During the early part of the course these students' relative age was the predominate aspect of their identity that affected how they felt to be in a classroom again. Other aspects of their identity that might be expected to confer an advantage was negated by their feelings about being old in the context of a social space where there is a perception that a particular social space is normally populated by 'young people', where 'being a student' is

associated with being young then not being able to draw on that source of identity is initially disempowering. Younger students' initial reactions were either influenced by how they saw their new learner identity in relation to their earlier selves or in relation to how the Access course could be used as a vehicle for changing their identity. These students were not intimidated by being in a classroom again. Unlike their older peers I would suggest they saw the classroom as a social space that was 'normal' for them, as being a location that was going to enable them to fulfil their expectations. What this shows is that age is an important facet of learner identity that affects the way students feel when initially (re)engaging with education in a post-compulsory setting. It also shows the challenge that the College and the course team have in creating an environment where older learners can feel they belong. Despite the discourse of inclusiveness and cooperation and the practical steps to incorporate them into practice these students did not feel that they belonged and that they were outsiders looking in.

Forming communities of learning

Induction included teambuilding activities that were designed to introduce students to the course's cooperative ethos and offered the opportunity for students to begin the process of getting to know each other. Teambuilding involves teachers organising the way students interact with each other through 'ice-breakers'. Following induction students attended timetabled classes. In contrast to the closely structured induction programme students are free to sit next to whom they like and to interact freely. However, although

teachers may no longer influence the way students interact that doesn't mean that such interactions were unstructured.

The research I carried out supports the contention that identity structures interactions. Zakia, for example, felt obliged to play down her religious identity because she felt it might be a barrier to interaction (see p.116/117). Sources of identity played a role in shaping the initial interactions of the students. In Class A Frederic suggested he got on well with Robert because of a shared sense of age and maturity, Sophie met up with those she was already used to and Danni suggested groups formed in the class through sharing the same views and understandings (see p.110). In Class B Feluga worked with Safi because they shared same background and were nearly the same age. Armita, when discussing what drew her to working with Valdas, Lucas and another student not interviewed was that they shared the same physical characteristics and shared the same experiences outside the college. Amrita also thought that at the beginning of the course students try to find out the sort of people they would like to socialise and study with. Valdas placed the emphasis on students' identities as learners. He was concerned to form working relationships with those who had a particular attitude towards their studies, one that equated with his own (see p.112/113).

Although the groups that formed early on in the course were sustained over time students were prepared to change with whom they worked. In Class A Frederic felt that after a while he wasn't benefiting from his partnership with Robert and went to work with Joan. Sophie stopped sitting in the class with

those she socialised with because they talked too much (see p.111). In Class B Halice found it difficult to establish relationships in the class. She sat on her own or sat with different students at different times. At the beginning of the course Jose sat with a particular group of students. One of these was from France and he sat with him because he had a lot of friends from that country. However, one of the students in the group would ask stupid questions and another talked too much in the class. This distracted him and it was at this stage that Jose made the decision to work with Valdas because he was perceived as being more serious, someone who just wanted to study (see p.114).

Students from both classes referred to age as being an important source of identity that shaped the pattern of early interactions and group formation within each class. Other sources of identity in terms of outwardly visible forms of identification were also cited as being factors that determined initial interactions and group formation. However, students were prepared to change who they worked with if they felt they needed to. Additionally, there were students who worked alone or did not align themselves to any particular group of students in the class.

Fully functioning learning communities

In the initial stages of the course certain sources of identity closed off options for engagement and constrained actions and interactions. Once students were fully participating in the life of the class sources of identity continued to influence the way students interacted and participated in classroom practice.

Age, age difference and the relationship between age and attitudes towards study emerged as a theme that continues to have an impact on practice. In Class A, Joan talked of getting annoyed with the behaviour of the 'youngsters' in the class and Robert thought that these students tried to challenge the tutors, to try their patience (see p.115). In Class B, Armita noted that although she was the same age as the younger students she could see that their behaviour was unacceptable at times. However, relative youth was also seen to bring instrumental advantages. Alberto noted that younger students tended to have good knowledge of Information Technology that older students (and staff) could take advantage of (see p.115/116).

Diversity was associated with 'different ideas' (Danni, Class A, Interview 1) that could be drawn on in the classroom. Having people in the class from different countries meant that a variety of perspectives could be brought into discussions in the classroom. Alberto talked about Danni having a 'Soviet view' and he also commented that 'we have some people from Africa (in the class) and they see things differently'. Additionally:

I was talking in Economics about farming and they've (the students born in Africa) experienced some of the things we talk about (Alberto, Class A, Interview 1)

Whereas, in the early stages of the course 'difference', including age, could be seen as closing off options for interaction, now it could be seen as a useful resource, as bringing experience, practice, knowledge and understanding that could be drawn on by others.

Whilst background in terms of age, ethnicity and nationality can be seen as shaping initial interactions these sources of identity did not act as 'limiting' in terms of student interaction. Students looked to particular types of learner identity as a determining factor in the decisions that were taken about whom to work with. Attitude towards study was seen as important. Where a particular student was known to have good subject knowledge, or the ability to master the subject, that individual was seen as a resource that could be used by others to support their learning. Where others saw a particular student's practice and command of the course's subject matter as providing a benefit to the learning community issues such as age, ethnicity and nationality melted away. As students' identities changed over time through mutual engagement in community practices it opened up the possibilities for interactions with students from groups hitherto seen as 'other'. Cultural and national diversity was seen as a useful resource that could be drawn on with respect to particular aspects of the curriculum. Students' lived experiences associated with their nationality, their upbringing were seen as enriching dialogue and supporting learning. Overall, diversity was seen as supporting learning as the students progressed through the course.

Learning and social participation

I want to draw on one strand of the theoretical framework (p.48) to discuss the classroom as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998). For the Main Study the two classes that comprise the Access to Business programme have been theorised as individual communities of practice where each of these learning communities develop their own

practices through mutual engagement in a shared enterprise. Mutual engagement in a shared enterprise might suggest that all members of a particular community are interacting with all others in the same way. Where each class is conceptualised as *a whole* as a community of practice the evidence shows that this is not the case. Instead, the evidence suggests that each class should be theorised as a constellation of communities (Wenger, 1998) 'sub-communities' or groups within the class as a whole.

These groups formed quite early on and the evidence from the study points to group formation being influenced by identity and cultural differentiation which in turn helped to shape the development of and attitudes towards classroom practice. In Class A, for example, reference was made to the unacceptable behaviour of some of the students (see p.115) and a number of students in Class B looked to work with students who had learner identities that accorded with their own (see p.112/113). Making choices about who to work with based upon perceived difference revealed that there was a process of labelling from the beginning. Already students were having labels ascribed to them that had an impact upon the way they interacted and functioned in the learning community. Where students identified strongly with a particular type of discourse this led to the development of different groups within the class. Not all students saw themselves as belonging to particular groups. In these cases students saw themselves as working alone or at the margins of established groups (see Zakia in Class A, p.118 and Halice in Class B, p.114). Where students don't identify with a particular group they need to operate alone or to participate at the margins of an established group. This may not be a

disadvantage to the individual who wants to establish an identity as an independent learner and in fact may contribute to class cohesion as they act as a conduit for practice across and between groups.

Identities are formed through identification and negotiability (Wenger, 1998). Identification is about aligning with particular styles and discourses and negotiability refers to the ability to shape the meanings that matter within a community of practice. I have suggested that the evidence points to the two Access classes being made up of different sub-communities and where this is the case an individual's identity will be constructed within and through them rather than through the class as a whole. Where a class is made up of different sub-communities alignment and negotiability forms identities that may lead to particular sub-community practices that come into conflict with the styles and discourses of other sub-communities within the classroom.

Evidence for this is provided in the responses from the students I interviewed from both classes. Alberto noted that some of his fellow students failed to attend classes on time and handed their work in late (see p.115) and Armita considered that some of the students in her class had unacceptable behaviour (see p.119). Those interviewed aligned and identified themselves with a discourse that normalises a particular way of behaving and of acceptable classroom behaviour and maturity. This accords with an explicit and tacit understanding of what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour as embodied in the actions and reactions of teachers and students. There is an expectation that the course will attract students that will adopt a particular

approach to their studies that precludes certain behaviour, the sort of behaviour seen as more appropriate for other kinds of course.

Student dropout: perspectives, perceptions and learner identity

Research into student dropout has been extensive (for example see Tinto, 1975; Martinez, 1995; Medway & Penney, 1994; MacDonald, Karkalas & Mackenzie, 1996; Callander, 1999; Hodgkinson & Bloomer, 2001; Yorke, 1997). Much of the research into student dropout focuses on the individual. Early research into the phenomenon suggested that students are more likely to dropout if they fail to integrate (Spady, 1970, 1971) and this failure to integrate is linked to an individual's background characteristics, attributes, motivations and commitment (Tinto, 1975). The focus of this research and much subsequent research sees dropout as being associated with an individual lacking certain characteristics necessary to persist. Even where structural reasons are given such as not having sufficient and/or the right forms of capital (see Martinez, 1995; Callender, 1999; Hodgkinson & Bloomer, 2001; Yorke, 1997) the deficit model is still implicitly drawn on to explain the phenomenon. However, there is other research that finds a relationship between dropout and poor college experience (Medway and Penney, 1994) and dissatisfaction with the course (MacDonald, Karkalas and Mackenzie, 1996).

Retention and dropout formed an important part of the Initial Study. Most students on the Access to Business programme are successful and the programme, as a whole, performs satisfactorily. However, as a tutor I am

concerned about any student dropping out. Additionally, the difference in dropout rates between Class A and Class B led me to initially research the phenomenon (see p.71/72). My research moved on to take on a wider perspective, but I was still able to collect qualitative data about the issue for the Main Study. The limitations of my research meant I was unable to collect sufficient data to offer an explanation of the differences in rates of dropout between the two Access classes. However, it did afford me the opportunity to explore students' attitudes towards dropout and the relationship between these attitudes and learner identity. The Access tutors had their own views about why students dropout. Tutors' attitudes and behaviour towards 'at risk' students can influence the views of continuing students because tutors hold positions of power within the learning community. Helen, the Access to Business tutor suggested that students who are unable to meet the demands of the course are most likely to dropout. Aspects of the students' identities and circumstances conspire to make it difficult to continue on the course. The reasons given for the circumstances of why particular students dropped out were varied but there was a common underpinning theme that focused on the student unable to fulfil the course's requirements either through their own 'failings' or because there were 'external constraints' that got in the way of their role as a student. Factors associated with the College or course was not raised as a possible issue that might influence departure decisions.

I asked students why they thought their fellow students had withdrawn from the course early and what factors could help overcome difficulties. The advantage of this approach is that the respondents studied with these students

and could be expected to have an insider's perspective on the phenomenon. An examination of students' responses (p.124-126) pointed to a common perception that cut across both classes. Respondents from both classes suggested that dropout was linked to a lack of commitment, not being serious about their studies and having outside interests/pressures. The predominant factor cited focused on the individual student. Students' drew on a discourse that foregrounded an individual's characteristics as being the most likely cause of withdrawal. Although external factors were acknowledged as being material to the departure decision the focus still came back to the individual. Laying the blame on the student for dropping out and absolving the course of responsibility may be a way of reinforcing their own identity as a successful student since it is principally down to the student's own commitment, application and ability that determines success or failure. Methodological factors should not be discounted in evaluating the findings. Since I had a dual role as a teacher and researcher, it would take a particularly confident respondent to criticise teachers or the programme particularly since the interviews took place near the end of the course when final credits were being studied for. The question was framed in such a way that it focused the interviewee on the individual rather than the college and external factors although I did explore these issues in follow up questions and the dialogue that ensued. By focusing on external constraints the Access tutor sought to absolve, at least tacitly, the College or course for early withdrawal.

Students were divided when it came to the issue of whether or not they had experienced any difficulties with the course that could have jeopardised their

studies. A number did not experience any difficulties, and those that did, cited external factors such as family problems, job pressures and complications associated with claiming benefits. The students who had experienced problems suggested that these were overcome because of their personal goal of gaining a place at university whereas the Access tutors saw the importance of the group, teambuilding and induction in supporting the reduction of dropout and enhancing retention. A number of students from both groups didn't feel that anything much could be done to reduce dropout other than enrolling 'different' students although there were suggestions that aberrant behaviour should be challenged earlier through sanctions. An exploration of these students' attitudes does not offer anything new to the issue of student dropout.

Recruitment practice and the shaping of learning communities

The catalyst for my research was the difference in performance in terms of student dropout and effectiveness between Class A and Class B and why our students dropped out. The tutors and students I interviewed supported the contention that there was a difference between the two classes and this difference arose out of the composition of the two groups. Class A comprised students born and/or educated in this country ('home students') and Class B was made up of students born and educated abroad. From the tutors' perspective there was a material difference in the way home and international students identified with the college. Katie thought that for students from overseas:

The college and the course give them an identity and something that can make them feel that they belong here (Initial study)

Helen, the Access to Business tutor made a similar comment:

Class B find themselves in a new situation, fairly new, a lot of them don't have a family here (Initial study)

In contrast to the situation the students born abroad find themselves in, for home students 'there is something else going on in their lives' (Katie, Initial study) and 'Class A already have certain friends...so college life is possibly not as important to them as it was to Class B' (Helen, Initial study). The inference is that the difference between the two groups is that for students with fewer relationships and friends outside the college resident in this country the college acts as a focus for their lives, increasing their sense of identity as a student. With less going on outside these students are able to focus more on their studies. Although there were limited interactions between the two Classes, students did notice a difference between them. Danni, for example, noted that 'the other class looks more civilised...they are people who just come to this country to do well' (Class A, Interview 1). Armita commented:

You can see that foreign speakers even though their second language is English, they're working even harder and they're doing better than the ones who's speaking English as a first language (Armita, Class B, Interview 2).

Armita had formed a working relationship with three other students in the class, two of whom I had interviewed as part of the study (Valdas and Jose). These three students exhibited similar attitudes that encapsulate the perception of difference between Class A and Class B. They have aspects of their identities that are different but there are also factors that are common and cut across differences in gender, age and nationality. A discourse that

focuses on the importance of education and hard work can be seen as a thread that runs through these students' family and educational backgrounds (see p.96-100 and appendix). This discourse is embodied in the students' learner identities and it structures whom these students work with and the form that their practice takes in the classroom. Although such a group within a class can have beneficial consequences for the members of that group it is important to consider the implications for the class as learning community and for the wider Access to Business programme.

Where students who have particularly strong learner identities work together it can have varying consequences. It can either act as an example to others in the class or their practice may create an environment where others in the class don't feel that they can match their performance. This may lead to the formation of out-groups who form practices that are different and/or run counter to the discourse and practices of the Access programme. However, Class B has consistently had a lower dropout rate than Class A over the years and this suggests that having international students in the class brings benefits overall.

The composition of the two classes is governed by the recruitment policy of the course team. If it accepted that having international students in a class might bring benefits to the class as a whole there is an argument that locating all these students in one class damages the programme as a whole and that recruitment into the two classes should use different criteria. Having international students in both classes could help to improve practice in both

classes. However it might dilute the impact their presence has in the classroom. Another argument in favour of changing the recruitment policy is because of the impact that labelling can have. Individuals act towards things according to the meanings they have for them (Blumer, 1969). If a student or class of students is labelled in a particular way that can have implications for the way the teachers act towards them and this in turn will have an impact upon how students see themselves and their actions.

Summary of findings

The diverse nature of the students on the Access to Business programme and the course team's recruitment policy provided the conditions to carry out research that is different to that which has been carried out before. The findings are summarised by addressing the research questions posed (see p.14):

Key question: how do students from diverse backgrounds experience learning on an Inner-City Access course?

Different aspects of identity affected the way students experienced the course. Age and age difference had an impact. At the beginning of the course older students felt uncomfortable about being in a classroom again. Some of the younger students were seen as having an adverse impact on learning. However, younger students were seen to bring instrumental advantages because of their perceived relative command of information technology in comparison to older students and staff.

Other visible manifestations of identity helped to structure early interactions. However, over time attitudes towards study transcended such 'difference' and students' identities as learners shaped interactions.

Diversity was seen as supporting learning. In contrast to other research that suggests that students prefer to work with others like themselves (Pederson, 1991, Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Quintrell & Westwood, 1994, Ledwith *et al*, 1998, see p.33/34) this study has produced evidence that shows students perceive different aspects of identity as supporting learning. Students recognised that having students from different countries and cultures brought different experiences into the classroom that could be drawn on as a resource for learning.

Sub-questions:

Does the Access to Business course at Inner-London College attract students from groups under-represented in higher education?

There is evidence that Access courses as a whole are fulfilling its mission to target under-represented groups (DfES, 2003, see p.26/27). In contrast to this overall picture the research I carried out on the family/educational backgrounds of the students and the reasons given for wishing to (re)engage in education suggests that the Access to Business course at Inner-London College has largely been colonised by students in possession of social resources (habitus and capital) and learner identities that normalises engagement with and participation in post-compulsory education. The course

attracts students who come to live in London, either in their own right or as members of families, for economic, social or educational reasons.

The Access to Business course at the College does not attract White British students from disadvantaged backgrounds even though this ethnic group is the largest in the geographical area within which the Access to Business course attracts students. This contrasts with other Access courses and with the College as a whole. The reasons why the course does not attract members of particular groups lay outside the scope of this study but could be the basis for further research (see next chapter).

How does a classroom setting characterised as diverse affect the formation and functioning of learning communities?

Socially constructed sources of identity (age, ethnicity, nationality) influenced the formation of groups within the classroom. Aspects of identity structured early interactions, opening up opportunities for interaction but also acting as a barrier to working with particular students. Older students were affected by their age in relation to the age of other students in the class and this produced feelings associated with being marginal to classroom practice at the beginning of the course. There was evidence that suggested that students' nationality and ethnicity also influenced working relationships between students at the early part of the course but at the same time students' identities as learners also became influential. Students were prepared to 'seek out' the sort of students they felt they could work with. The classroom included students who

had an independent learner identity, who didn't see themselves as belonging to any particular group in the class.

The classroom can be theorised as comprising a number of groups or sub-communities that develop their own practices. Groups form their own practices within the classroom. Members are 'fixed' into particular attitudes and behaviour that may or may not accord with the discourse and practices that teachers' see as supporting student progress. Some of these groups identified with and aligned themselves to the programme and others did not. Membership of particular groups materially affected participation in classroom practices.

What are the attitudes towards student dropout?

Students from both classes linked dropout to individual failings. There was a perception that students who dropped out did so because they lacked the commitment and motivation to succeed. Tutors' attitudes suggested that dropout is linked to students' inability to meet the demands of the course and/or external factors intervening to prevent continuation on the course. Older students were more willing to acknowledge that sometimes students could not avoid early departure and that external factors could play a part in departure decisions. Structural, institutional or course effects were not raised as factors that might contribute towards student dropout. The evidence did not produce findings that were significantly different from other studies.

Additional evidence:

Recruitment policy and practice have a material effect on the formation and functioning of learning communities. Aspects of identity associated with learner identity and attitudes towards study helps to shape classroom practice.

There was a perception that Class A and Class B had distinct identities and the difference was associated with the course's recruitment policy and the identities of the classes' students. In particular, Class B consisted of international students or economic migrants committed to their studies and this had a material effect on the overall performance of the class as a whole.

Conclusion

This chapter has given the opportunity to address the research questions and arrive at a number of findings. The findings have raised a number of issues that may have implications for policy and practice and I will turn to those in the next chapter.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

Introduction

The previous chapter ended with a summary of the findings that arose out of my research. In this chapter I first want to reflect on my experiences of conducting the research project. I will then discuss the study and what I consider to be its original features and contribution to knowledge. I will then examine the findings of my research in relation to the implications for educational policy and practice. The chapter ends with suggestions for further research.

Reflection on my research

Before I reflect on the research I carried out I want to briefly comment on my experiences as a teacher embarking on a new role as a qualitative researcher. Issues of identity in relation to my students have played a governing role in my research. However, I think it is important for me to acknowledge the impact that this research project has had on me, the way participation in learning has changed me, has led to a change in my identity. Learning is about becoming a different person and participation in the practices associated with being a research student gave me the confidence to look for opportunities to engage more fully in teacher education at Inner London College and elsewhere. Additionally, embarking on this study has made me realise that research into educational practice can bring benefits to

teachers and students alike. Research doesn't only provide possible answers to questions but also opens up possibilities for further research that will, in turn, feed into practice.

Turning to the research project itself, I argue that drawing on Wenger's (1998) conception of learning as social participation and the associated concepts of alignment and identification have contributed towards the originality of my research (see p.166). It helped me to focus on the way the classroom can be theorised as comprising a number of communities of practice, where different practices can emerge influenced by members' learner identities. However, there is one weakness to this approach I want to outline. The study can be criticised for over emphasising the role that Wenger's (1998) concepts of identification and alignment can play in theorising the classroom. This emphasise has meant that I could be criticised for downplaying the effect that embodied social resources (habitus and capital) have on students' identities as learners. In my study I stressed the importance of students' attitudes towards their studies without necessarily exploring in sufficient detail deeper-rooted factors that influence these attitudes. Sources of identity act to position actors socially. Students do not enter a social space such as a classroom with equal power to shape its culture and practices. Although I believe I have touched upon these issues, the study can be criticised for failing to explore them more fully and I will return to this theme later in the chapter when I explore opportunities for further research.

With respect to the practicalities of the research, qualitative data has underpinned analysis and evaluation. The quality of this analysis and evaluation is to some extent dependent upon the methods used to collect the data and the nature of the research setting itself. I believe that the Access to Business programme has provided an excellent opportunity for research. However, had I known then, at the end of the research process, what I know now, the challenges might have proved a sufficient deterrent to embarking on the research in the first place. This is probably an argument for ensuring that no novice researchers should be allowed to discover the reality of research and have spelt out to them too clearly the challenges that await them!

The collection, analysis and evaluation of data lie at the heart of the research process. As such it becomes crucial to the success of the project. Decisions made early on about how data is to be collected shapes subsequent findings. In my view I could have identified a more representative sample of students to interview. Although the students I chose were broadly representative of students' diversity in terms of age, nationality and ethnicity, methodological considerations meant that I only chose students that I perceived as not being at risk of dropping out. This meant that the voices of these particular students remained silent and it closed off options for exploring diversity in terms of students' identities as learners, for hearing about the experiences of students who might have fragile identities as learners (see p.84). Similarly, only choosing students who I was confident had sufficient competence in spoken English meant certain students' experiences were also not heard (see p.85). Another weakness in the research was my use of focus groups. I had hoped

to obtain additional data from conducting focus group interviews with staff and students. In the Initial Study my experience of running focus groups led me to conclude that this would not be an effective method of collecting data from the students (see p.77). However, I was confident that I could use this method to collect data from the teachers that taught on the Access to Business course. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons I was unable to collect any data of use from this method (see p.88/89). Thus, none of the focus groups I conducted realised collectable data and this meant that a valuable source of information was not available to be analysed and evaluated.

The case study and its contribution towards knowledge

I believe that this case study has made a contribution towards knowledge in the field of educational policy and practice. The contribution towards knowledge and its originality arose out of the combination of a number of factors. Firstly, the research setting provided the conditions to carry out an original study. Inner-London College's location and the diverse nature of the Access to Business course's intake supplied the opportunity to carry out research that was different. Secondly, the recruitment policy led to the two classes having elements of commonality and difference enabling an analysis with and between the two classes (see p.10/11). Thirdly, I drew on Wenger's (1998) conception of learning as social participation and the related concepts of identification and alignment to theorise the Access classroom as comprising a number of sub-communities of practice. Taken together I believe these factors led to the research being original and making a contribution to knowledge.

The study showed that sources of identity played a part in shaping classroom practice. Age and age difference had an impact on how students experienced the early stages of the course and once the course was fully functioning as a learning community. Other visible manifestations of identity also shaped early interactions, opening up possibilities for interaction but also closing off others. However, the evidence also suggested that diversity came to be seen as supporting learning. Students recognised that having students from different countries and cultures brought different experiences into the classroom that could be drawn on as a resource for learning.

Seeing learning as social participation and theorising the classroom as comprising groups of students or sub-communities helped to gain a fresh insight into how the classroom functioned as a learning community. The evidence showed how, at the start of the course, students' age, nationality and ethnicity influenced working relationships between students. However, at the same time students' identities as learners also became influential. Students were prepared to 'seek out' the sort of students they felt they could work with. As a consequence, groups of students or sub-communities formed and developed their own practices within the classroom. Members of these sub-communities were 'fixed' into particular attitudes and behaviour that accorded to a greater or lesser extent with the discourse and practices that teachers' saw as supporting student progress. Some of these groups identified with and aligned themselves to the programme and others did not. Membership of particular groups materially affected participation in classroom practices. The classroom also included students who had an independent

learner identity, who didn't see themselves as belonging to any particular group in the class. The Access to Business team's recruitment policy led to Class A consisting mainly of British born and/or educated students and Class B comprising students who had been born and educated abroad. Using relative measures of student retention as a measure of performance Class B performed better than Class A (see p.71/72). The research suggested that this was because Class B included more students with strong identities as learners. They were migrants who had come to this country to re-position themselves economically. In the classroom they looked to work with others with the same attitudes towards study. Thus learner identity helped to structure classroom practice and this had a material effect on the overall performance of the class as a whole.

Evidence about the family/educational backgrounds of the students and the reasons given for wishing to (re)engage in education suggested that the course was colonised by students in possession of social resources (habitus and capital) and learner identities that normalised engagement with and participation in post-compulsory education. The course attracted students who came to live in London, either in their own right or as members of families, for economic, social and/or educational reasons. The Access to Business course at the College did not attract White British students from disadvantaged backgrounds even though this ethnic group is the largest in the geographical area within which the Access to Business course attracted students. This is in contrast to other Access courses at the College.

From research into practice

In this section I want to look at what has been learnt from the study and put forward suggestions as to how it can inform practice.

Improving classroom practice in diverse learning communities

Psychological theories of learning focus on how the individual acquires knowledge, understanding and skills. However, theorising learning as embodied, social, cultural and bound up with notions of identity (Hodkinson *et al*, 2004, Wenger, 1998) puts social interaction centre stage and opens up new ways of thinking about how learning can be supported in the classroom. Social interaction is about individuals coming together to participate in shared practices. I want to draw on the findings of my research to suggest how classroom practice can be improved. Adult learners need support in overcoming negative feelings on entering educational institutions (QAA, 2004). Older students in both classes felt alienated and intimidated. Feelings of intimidation and alienation are bound up with the issue of identity and difference. Older students' responses were not in relation to being in a classroom again but in relation to being in a classroom where a particular socially constructed source of identity was the cause of discomfort. I have suggested elsewhere that there is a tendency for teachers to label all the individuals before them as 'students' and this tends to downplay difference. This means that where difference is a cause of negative feelings teachers can fail to respond in an appropriate manner. This failure to accommodate difference can be particularly problematic in learning communities that,

paradoxically, are characterised as diverse. Inner London College's equal opportunities policy as communicated to the Access students requires staff and students not to exhibit sexist, racist or homophobic language or behaviour. Equal opportunities were framed negatively and did little to celebrate difference or see it as a positive resource. Since identity is seen as being at the core of social learning theory (Wenger, 1998) an awareness of its impact on learning should be at the forefront of educational practice. Issues of identity can be embedded at an early stage of the course. Access is about identity change (Brine and Waller, 2004). Students should be made aware of the impact that Access and higher education will have on their lives and on aspects of their identity. Information should be framed so that it enthuses rather than intimidates but it should not shy away from the fact that students are engaged in learning that involves them changing identity, where learning is about transformation, acquiring new perspectives (Mezirow, 1991) and looking afresh at themselves in relation to the world.

Identity, diversity and difference effected early interaction. Barriers to interaction associated with particular aspects of identity cannot be allowed to form. Evidence from the study showed that students valued diversity. In diverse educational settings diversity should be employed as a resource that the whole class can draw on. Practitioners need to consider how best to convert diversity into a resource for learning. Diversity can only be harnessed in this way through social participation and student interaction. At induction activities group activities should be devised that provide an opportunity for all the students in the class to interact meaningfully with each other. Groups

should be formed and reformed so that students are given the opportunity to work with those that they might not normally come into contact with.

Where a classroom is made up of students that are used to working with each other it can help to counter the formation of sub-communities that fail to align themselves with the discourse and practices of the course. Groups can be made up of students that see themselves as sharing the same attitudes towards classroom practice. In this study groups aligned themselves with the aims of the programme whilst others did not. If group formation is based to an extent on attitudes towards study those not perceived as 'serious learners' can become excluded, forming sub-communities that are characterised as 'other' in the context of the dominant discourse of the Access programme. A balance needs to be struck between interventions that do not interfere with the formation of groups that align themselves with appropriate practices and teacher activities that discourage the formation of groups that adopt practices that are detrimental to these groups' progress and that of other students in the classroom as a whole. However, the suggestion that lecturers should intervene in the way a class structures itself into sub-communities of practice challenges the culture of the Access classroom where students are allowed to form their own groups according to their own preferences. Students on Access courses are adults and should be allowed to form their own relationships. However, where the dynamics of the class and the formation of groups with the classroom adversely affect learning for the class as a whole there may be an argument for teachers to intervene. Petty (2006) refers to the fact that 'most teachers use friendship groups in class' (Petty, 2006:142).

A problem with this approach, as he sees it, is that it perpetuates group formation based on certain aspects of identity. He advocates, despite charges that may be made of 'social engineering', that it is legitimate to break down barriers between different groups by mixing them. Students from different groups can be encouraged to work together using cooperative learning techniques. Although Petty's concern was principally one of encouraging cross-cultural engagement I believe that the approach can also apply to mixing students who exhibit differing attitudes towards study. Thus students should be organised into groups that facilitate effective learning for all the students in the class. Issues of diversity and attitude should play a part in the formation of such groups not the preferences of individual students. If this practice is normalised at induction, as I also suggest, then there should not be any resistance to the strategy by the students.

Improving practice also involves responding to the issue of student dropout. I have suggested that teachers should intervene in the classroom to structure sub-communities. This can help to ensure that individual students or groups of students don't adopt inappropriate practices. Students can have different ways of working but all need to align their practice with the needs of the course. Where this happens students are more likely to identify with programme discourse and embody its aims and objectives into their own identity. When this happens students will adapt their actions in such away that commitment is maintained and early departure from the programme becomes less likely.

The differential performance between the two Access to Business classes, where Class B performs 'better' than Class A, has led to internal debate within the course team over the years and I have discussed the possible reasons for this differential performance elsewhere in this paper. In the context of local practice a decision was taken by the course team to recruit 'home' and 'international' students into the same class so that the distinctive characteristics associated with the two classes now no longer apply. This policy change was activated for the 2006/7 academic year and a decision has been taken to continue with this policy into the future.

Widening participation and the Access to Business course at Inner-London College

Widening participation is bound up with countering societal structures that disadvantage certain groups in society in relation to engagement in higher education. Individual action is shaped by habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Socialising agencies influence the nature of these resources and the extent to which they allow for the possibility of engagement in higher education. Where individuals are badly served by society, strategies need to be found to change that society or at least find practical solutions to what might seem to be intractable problems.

I argue that my study shows that the Access to Business course has been largely colonised by members of groups in society for which engagement in further and higher education is seen as part of a normalised discourse that

they have incorporated into their identities. This is not because these individuals are 'preferred' to others that may have applied to study but because members of certain groups are not applying in the first place. In contrast to one study that found that Access courses were failing to attract students from minority ethnic backgrounds (Connelly & Chakrabarti, 1999 and see p.26/27 of this study) my research showed that, most notably, the Access to Business course failed to recruit White British students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The Connelly and Chakrabarti (1999) research related to Scotland whereas my study is London based. This suggests that there maybe a geographical dimension to the way different groups engage with Access courses, although I do acknowledge that other Access courses at the College have different proportions of targeted groups. However, this does not obviate the need to find strategies to attract those groups in society that remain indifferent to education after school. Passive targeting of underrepresented groups puts the emphasis on members of those groups, not only having an awareness of the opportunities Access courses provide, but also relies on individuals having the capacity to incorporate into their identity the possibility of engagement in further and higher education. Connelly and Chakrabarti (1999) suggest that more active measures to recruit particular groups should be considered. In the context of their study they found examples of how this might be done:

By personal contact, community liaison, leaflets targeted at particular groups in community languages and carefully planned meetings with prospective students (Connelly & Chakrabarti, 1999:242).

Clearly, in the context of my study, measures would need to be tailored to the particular needs of the situation in Inner-London College but the principle remains the same, the need to find active approaches to targeting hard-to-reach groups. One initiative that looks to target such groups is a scheme run by the Department for Education and Science (DfES) known as 'Aimhigher'. Aimhigher works to bring partners together in order to reach out to schools and communities to encourage commitment to learning, to stimulate aspirations, to help raise attainment so that learners can realize their ambitions. Partnerships put on activities aimed at raising awareness and aspirations among targeted individuals. Activities include arranging school visits to university campuses, university students giving presentations to targeted groups in schools about university life, taster courses and summer schools.

I believe that Access can draw on the expertise and resources of Aimhigher. Not all school and college students are in a position to enter higher education immediately after compulsory education. The possibility of entering higher education as a mature student needs to be made known to school and college students. With Aimhigher expanding into primary schools there is an opportunity to engage the parents of primary school students, to publicise what Access can offer *them*. Publicity materials could be produced and Access practitioners could join partnership teams in their activities. Whilst embedding Access as a route into higher education as part of the Aimhigher programme is a possible strategy to engage groups who are involved in formal education in some capacity, it does not help to reach those who have

no connection with educational institutions. In the context of the need to reach out to underrepresented groups in the white community it should be possible to establish links with tenants associations and community groups on council estates and social housing projects. Publicity and activities like that of the Aimhigher programme could be adapted to meet the needs of the particular groups encountered.

Further research

My research theorised learning as social participation and I used the related concepts of identification and alignment (Wenger, 1998) to explore the way the classroom functioned as a community of learning. This approach has given me a fresh insight into learning and educational practice. However, I want to suggest a way of developing the research further by moving away from a narrow exploration of learning and embracing a broader approach, one that recognises a broad range of forces that can impact upon the experience of learning.

Transforming learning cultures

Hodkinson *et al* (2004) use Bourdieu's notions of habitus and field and Lave and Wenger's (1991) conception of communities of practice to argue that cultures exist in and through interaction and communication. A learning culture is a particular way to understand a learning site and a learning site can be seen to be a practice constituted by the actions, dispositions and interpretations of the participants. Individuals are differently positioned with regard to shaping and changing culture. People are socially positioned

through class, gender, ethnicity and other sources of identity. A cultural understanding of learning can be developed through the concept of 'learning field' where learning is recognised as a social process where differing power relations between participants can be analysed. Additionally, it allows for the integration of individual and social perspectives and allows for learning sites to be defined beyond the confines of particular localised settings such as a particular course or class of students.

Where the aim is to improve practice the focus moves beyond a cultural understanding of learning to improving learning cultures, to improving teaching and learning. It is suggested that using a learning cultures approach to understand and improve learning can be applied to any learning site, however it is defined (James and Biesta, 2007). Thus, for example, it can be applied to further education as a whole, to an individual college or to a particular programme or course. Using a learning cultures approach can lead to some key benefits:

- It shows how complex interrelationships influence learning.
- It shows that both external and internal factors influence learning.
- It enables a clearer identification of any barriers to effective learning, as well as synergies to promote it.
- It shows more clearly what can be achieved to preserve and enhance effective learning, and who may action those changes.
- It makes clear the extent to which learning effectiveness lies within or beyond the scope of a particular tutor or teaching team.

- It raises awareness of possible undesirable learning, and facilitates considered judgements about the value of learning, as well as its effectiveness (James and Biesta, 2007:83).

The study found that teaching and learning could be improved by changing the learning culture so that the factors that influence learning are convergent. Where convergence is strong the result can be synergistic leading to more effective learning. My proposal would be draw on the theoretical framework and methodological tools provided by James and Biesta (2007) to analyse a number of learning sites one of which would be the Access to Business programme. The starting point for any programme to change the culture of any learning site is to first of all to understand it, to explore the factors that influence learning and to determine the extent to which they are convergent or divergent. It is only then that efforts can be applied to change the culture and to improve teaching and learning.

Conclusion

This research project has given me the opportunity to learn about Access, my students and myself. The research has shown how Access needs to work harder to reach out to certain groups in the community. It has also shown how aspects of diversity can act as a barrier to classroom interaction. Diversity can also be a resource for learning. Teachers must consider how to draw on diversity to enhance the classroom experience. Incorporating students' identities into the life of the class can help students to identify with classroom practice. Drawing on the rich resource of diversity can enhance

the experience of the whole class. In attempting to address the research questions I believe that I have been able to gain new insights into how my students experience the course I have been involved with for so many years. I hope that I have been able to provide useful suggestions for future practice in the context of government policy on widening participation and for practical suggestions in the post-compulsory classroom.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Letter from college allowing the research to be carried out

8/11/05

Dear Paul Phillips,

I understand that you are undertaking research with the Open University and that this may involve you:

- Interviewing students
- Interviewing teaching staff
- Interviewing other staff employed by the college
- Using documents and data generated by the course team and others.

I understand you will be following the BERA ethical guidelines in your research www.bera.ac.uk/publications/pdfs/ETHICA1.PDF

This letter is to state that the college has given its consent for this research to take place

Kind regards

Lynne Graham

Head of BAIT School

Appendix 2

Student profile questionnaire

In order to support you in your learning it will help us to find out a little bit about you. Please complete the following information to help us help you

1 Name.....
.....
2 Age
3 Gender Male ☐ Female ☐
4 Nationality.....
5 First language.....
6 Length of time in country.....
7 Address whilst at college.....
8 Study address situation (e.g. parental home, sharing with friends, hostel, alone in
bedsit/flat).....
9 Has anyone in your family been to university? . Yes ☐ No ☐
10 Has any of your friends been to university? . Yes ☐ No ☐
11 Caring responsibilities? Yes ☐ No ☐
12 Journey to college. Easy ☐ OK ☐ Difficult ☐
13 Journey to college. Inexpensive ☐ OK ☐ Expensive ☐
14 Is your employer supportive? Yes ☐ No ☐ Doesn't know I'm a student ☐ Not employed ☐
15 If working, how many hours a week do you work?.....hours
16 Do you have a quiet space where you can study away from college? Yes ☐ No ☐
17 Reasons for joining course

You may tick **more** than one box

Study for a degree at university	<input type="checkbox"/>
Change the direction of my life	<input type="checkbox"/>
To get a better job once I have left university	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unable to get the job I want with the qualifications I have at present	<input type="checkbox"/>
Meet new people	<input type="checkbox"/>
See if education suits me	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other*	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Please specify.....
.....

Appendix 3

Profiles of students' interviewed

The profiles are constructed from three sources. The information in the first paragraph for each respondent is extracted from the questionnaire distributed at the beginning of the course (appendix 2). Information in the second paragraph (in italics) comes from an essay written by the students in their first communications class. Information in the third paragraph is extracted from the two sets of interviews carried out with the students as part of the study.

Class A

	Gender	Age	Country of Birth	Ethnicity
Robert	M	40	England	Black/British-Caribbean
Lauren	F	38	England	Black/British-Caribbean
Frederic	M	33	Sierra Leone	Black/British-African
Joan	F	32	Sudan	Black/British-African
Danni	M	24	Russia	White-Other
Zakia	F	22	Somalia	Black/British-African
Alberto	M	20	Brazil	White-Other
Sophie	F	20	England	Black/British-African

Robert, male, 40, born in UK, parents born in Jamaica, first language, English. Lives in flat and has quiet place to study. Family members and friends have been to university. Doesn't have caring responsibilities. Not employed. Joined course to study for a degree, change direction, get a better job after university, unable to get a job at present, meet new people.

He feels that lack of academic qualifications has hampered his career

There was an expectation in the family that Robert would start work after school. He considered his experience of secondary school as being 'somewhat negative' and feels that "there was not enough care at the time for young inner-city type kids" after school there would not be further education:

Lauren, female, 38, born in England, parents born in Jamaica, first language, English. Lived all her life in this country, lives at home and has quiet place to study. Family members and friends have been to university, has caring responsibilities. Not working. Joined course to study for a degree and change direction.

Born in Luton but sees herself as a 'true Londoner'. Left school early due to becoming pregnant as a teenager and has been a "stay at home" mother ever since.

Lauren had to leave school at fifteen after getting pregnant and although she had attempted to re-engage with education since school she found the pressures of bringing up her children meant she was unable to complete courses she had started.

Frederic, male, 33, born in Sierra Leone, parents born in Sierra Leone, Creole, Temne and English spoken. Been in England since 1993. Lives with distant aunt and has quiet place to study. Family members and friends have been to university, doesn't have caring responsibilities. Not employed. Joined course to study for a degree, change direction and get a better job after university. Unable to get job with current qualifications.

Civil War prevented his progress from O level to 'A' level in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Once in England has been working since now. When he arrived in England he had attempted to re-engage with education but was affected by the news from home - the war in Sierra Leone - because his family was still there.

Frederic describes himself as coming from 'a traditional ruling family' who attended 'one of the top five schools in the country'. However, he was unable to continue his studies because of the outbreak of civil war. Once in this country he attempted to continue his education but was unable to complete the courses he enrolled on because he was worried about his family in Sierra Leone and this meant he found it difficult to concentrate on his studies.

Joan, female, 32, born in Sudan, parents born in Africa, first language, 'mother tongue'. Lived in England 'a long time', lives at home and has quiet place to study. Family members and friends have been to university, has caring responsibilities. Not working. Joined course to study for a degree, change direction, to get a better job, unable to get the qualifications at present.

Comes from large family, went to primary school in Sudan, played with friends overlooking the Nile.

Joan's father's was an ambassador and she describes her family as 'educated'. Referring to her family she says that 'education is very important for us'. She was educated privately and then after school enrolled on a Commercial Studies course at university in Cairo, Egypt. She returned home to the Sudan after university but the situation worsened and she came to England as a refugee. Once in England she realised that her qualifications would not help her get a job so she decided she would have to start again, improving her English to begin with and then embarking on vocational qualifications. After this phase in her educational career Joan became pregnant and now has a child of two.

Danni, male, 21, born in Russia, Russian, Farsi and English spoken. Lived in country 7 years. Living 'in own house' and has quiet place to study. Family members and friends have been to university, has caring responsibilities. Working 35-40 hours a week with unsupportive employer. Joined course to study for a degree, change direction, get a better job after university and meet new people.

Document not available

Danni was born in Russia. His family was originally from Tajikstan and his father has business interests in both countries. His schooling was split between the two countries and then the family decided he should come to Britain to learn English. This was because 'when I was growing up in the 90's

there was a view in Russia that everyone should learn English'. This was possible because his mother is a BBC journalist, working for the World Service at Bush House. He went to secondary school where he spent two years learning to speak and read English. He then went to college to study for a vocational 'A' level in Business but he wasn't motivated at that time and failed to finish the course. Danni then went travelling and most recently he has been working in a shop.

Zakia, 22, female born in Somalia, parents born in Somalia, speaks English and Somali. Lived in country 5 years. Lives alone in flat and has quiet place to study. Family members and friends have been to university. Has caring responsibilities. Not working. Joined course to study for a degree.

Left Somalia at age of six because of war. Lost contact with family and from 1989 spent life travelling through Africa, Europe and North America with groups of people who were in the same situation. Arrived in London in 2000 and had to move around a lot, causing instability.

Zakia is a refugee from Somalia. She was separated from her parents when she was 'five or six' as a consequence of civil war and has never been reunited with them. She was 'adopted' by a group escaping the conflict and then subsequently by a family who looked after her through her childhood. Zakia was reluctant to discuss the details of her early life but suffice to say she found herself in London at the age of fifteen where she discovered through the Somalian community that she had an uncle who she then lived with. Once settled in this country she studied on a vocational business course but didn't finish it because she was forced to move.

Alberto, 20, male born in Brazil, parents born in Brazil, Portuguese and English spoken. Lived in country 10 years. Lives with sister and her two children, doesn't have quiet place to study. None in family has been to university but friends have, doesn't have caring responsibilities. Works 16 hours a week with unsupportive employer. Joined course to study for a degree, change direction of life and get a better job after university.

When he moved to England at the age of eight his life changed dramatically, moving from an outdoor life to an indoor life. Attended local primary and secondary schools. After GCSE's returned to Brazil.

Alberto was born in Brazil. His parents decided that Alberto should come to Britain because a relative living in this country had suggested to his parents that a British education would benefit their son. Having a grandfather with an Italian passport eased his passage and Alberto arrived in this country at the age of nine. He thrived at school and gained eight good GCSEs. After his GCSE's returned to Brazil, attempted to get into university in his home country but his British qualifications were not recognised. He had the opportunity to study further to gain entrance at university but decided instead to return to Britain and began working with his brother-in-law in the building trade.

Sophie, 20 female born in UK, parents born in Ghana, speaks English. Lived in country all her life, lives with parents and has quiet place to study. Family members and friends have been to university. Doesn't have caring responsibilities. Working 21 hours a week with supportive employers. Joined course to study for a degree, change direction of life, get a better job after university and meet new people.

First born of four girls, half brother that lives with father in Ghana. Switched from C of E to RC school which was hard. Joker in class, big problem was my attitude. Didn't achieve full potential at secondary school because of attitude and disrupting classes. At college learnt to speak properly to authority. Has gained confidence, self motivation

Sophie was born in Britain of Ghanaian parents. Although neither of her parents had been to university Sophie's father impressed upon her the importance of education. Sophie sees herself as able but she found she was bored at school and spoke of being 'easily distracted' and saw herself as a 'trouble maker'. This, she believes, affected her GCSE grades and led her down the vocational route at her local college. After a full time course at the

college she began working and studying part-time for a vocational accounting qualification.

Class B

	Gender	Age	Country of Birth	Ethnicity
Feluga	F	40	Morocco	Arab
Jose	M	26	Spain	White-Other
Valdas	M	24	Lithuania	White-Other
Faisal	M	20	Holland	Arab
Halice	F	21	Germany	Other
Armita	F	19	Lithuania	White-Other
Nadia	F	19	Sao Tome	Mixed-White/Black African
Andre	M	23	France	Black-African

Feluga, female, 40, born in Morocco, parents born in Morocco, languages spoken, Arabic and French. Lived twenty years in this country, sharing house; has quiet place to study. Family members and friends have been to university. She has caring responsibilities. Works 20 hours a week, employer doesn't know she's a student. Has joined course to progress to university, change direction of life, get a better job after university; unable to get job with current qualifications. She feels she has let herself and her parents down by not completing her studies when younger. She is the only one in her family who has not got a degree.

Oldest in family of five. Has international Bacc in experimental sciences. Sent to this country by father to study pharmaceutical studies. It was not easy to do pharmacy, studied science A levels but dropped the course. Has taken various other courses (English certificate, IATA, Business Admin) over years. Has worked as interpreter, worked for small company that ceased trading.

Feluga was born in Morocco. Her father was an army officer and her mother a gynaecologist. Feluga's state education was supported by private tuition because her parents 'had this drive for education'. After obtaining her International Baccalaureate in 1983 Feluga came to London because she had a cousin who lived in the city. Once in London she studied English and then enrolled on an 'A' level course at a college. However she didn't finish it and although she has attempted to re-engage with education before she hasn't

been able to complete courses she has started because of outside commitments 'getting in the way'. She is the only member of her family who does not have a degree.

Jose, male, 26, born in Spain, parents born in Spain, first language Spanish. Lived 4 years in this country and live with friends in flat. Family members and friends have been to university. He doesn't have caring responsibilities. Works 30 hours a week with supportive employer. Has a quiet place to study. Has joined course to progress to university and get a better job after university.

Parents still live in Seville with sister. No relatives in England but has friends. Interested in travelling. Would like to work for a large company where has possibility to travel.

Jose was born in Seville, Spain. At fifteen Jose was taken out of the state sector and sent to a private school that was 'very strict'. Jose's father had been to university, all his friends were going to university and 'there was an expectation' that he would go. However he failed university entrance exams twice and became disillusioned with education. A Spanish friend contacted him from London and encouraged him to come for an extended visit. He had intended to stay for one year that was six years ago. During that time Jose has studied English and worked in catering.

Valdas, male, 24, born in Lithuania, parents born in Lithuania; language(s) spoken, Lithuanian and Russian. Lived one year three months in this country with parents and has quiet place to study. Friends and family have been to university. He doesn't have caring responsibilities. Works 10-15 hours a week with supportive employer. Has joined course to progress to university and change direction of life.

After leaving school joined the Lithuanian army. Studied Swedish, German and his favourite language, English. Interested in finding out the meaning of

life. Wants to be in a profession, with creativity bringing us towards our personal aims

Valdas is from Lithuania. His mother is an Economics graduate. He was successful at school but instead choosing university after school he decided to join the army. This decision was 'controversial' for his family because instead of choosing officer training he undertook the training for other ranks. After initial training in the Intelligence Regiment he decided that he didn't want to stay in the army. Soon after leaving the army in 2004 Valdas came to London 'to earn some money' and he has been working and studying English since then.

Faisal, male, 20, born in Holland, parents born in Morocco/Algeria; language(s) spoken, Dutch and Arabic. Lived 2 years in this country renting room and has quiet place to study. Family members haven't been to university but friends have. He doesn't have caring responsibilities. Works 16-24 hours a week with unsupportive employer. Has joined course to progress to university, get a better job after university, meet new people, make friends, broaden horizons and 'obtain more knowledge'.

Oldest of four children, educated in Holland. Came to UK aged 18, made friends and enjoyed it here. Wants to get married, have children, finish degree, run own company.

Faisal was born, raised and went to school in Holland. His parents are Turkish and although neither of them went to university they impressed upon their son the importance of education. However, Faisal finished school before he was able to gain sufficient qualifications to attend university in Holland. Two years prior to joining the Access course Faisal left Holland to come to London for a holiday but decided to stay, find work and a place to live.

Halice, female, 21, born in Iran, parents born in Iran, languages spoken, Persian and German. Lived four months in this country, lives with parents in flat and has quiet place to study. Family members and friends have been to university. She has caring responsibilities. Works, employer doesn't know she's working. Has joined course to progress to university and get a better job after university.

Born in Iran, grew up in Germany. Moved to London after having visited friends and relatives over the years. Lived with uncle but rebelled against his strict rules, disrupted her education and returned to Germany. Sees the future in this country, not Germany because the opportunities are in London.

Halice, born in Iran, moved to Germany with her family when she was two years old following the Iran/Iraq war. She was able to do this because 'the family had money' and there was an uncle who lived in Germany. Halice went to school in Germany but didn't get the qualifications necessary to enter university in that country. She then moved to London to join her family who had left Germany the year before. Apart from joining her family her reason for coming to London was to study at a British university.

Armita, female, 19, born in Lithuania, parents born in Lithuania, first language, Lithuanian. Lived five years in this country, lives with parents in flat and has quiet place to study. Family members and friends have been to university. She has caring responsibilities. Works 12-15 hours a week with supportive employer. Has joined course to progress to university and meet new people.

Came here five years ago with family. Has one younger brother. Speaks Lithuanian at home and if necessary English as well. Couldn't speak English on arrival in England, went to college to learn. After learning English studied Business. She is getting closer and closer to her dream of graduating. Father has own company and told her to study Business. He wants her to help in the family business. Father has strong work ethic that is communicated to daughter.

Armita was born in Lithuania. She has a mother who went to university. Her father came to England in the 1990's to work as an agricultural labourer and now runs a business. Armita and the rest of the family joined him in 2000 when she was nearly fifteen. Her age made schooling problematic

Nadia, female, 19, born in Sao Tome, an island off Africa, parents born in Portugal, first language, Portugese. Lived two years in this country and lives with parents and has quiet place to study. Family members and friends have been to university. She has no caring responsibilities. Not employed. Has joined course to progress to university.

Mother is mixed 'race' (asian, black). Moved to Portugal when one year old. Did well at primary and mother was proud. Chose science at secondary school and then didn't do so well. Grades weren't good enough to go to university in Portugal. Came to England where it was perceived by her mother that it would be easier for her to finish her education. Nadine believes she is very shy and has difficulty socialising.

Nadia was born in Sao Tome, a small island off the coast of Africa that was a former Portuguese colony. Her father went to university and is now runs a business. Her family moved to Lisbon when she was very young and this is where Nadia was educated up to the age of seventeen. It was then that the family moved to London in 2003 because 'Portugal is a poor country'. The decision to move was her mothers. Once in London Nadia focused on learning English together with studying for a basic vocational business qualification in a further education college.

Andre, male, 23, born in France, parents born in France, first language, French. Arrived in London one year ago. Lives alone in a bedsit and has a quiet place to study. Family members and friends have been to university. He has no caring responsibilities. Not employed. Has joined course to progress to university.

Andre likes business studies and he thinks he will become a good business man.

Andre was born in France. Both his parents are French. Andre was at university in Paris last year but decided to leave the course early because he was studying law, a subject he didn't like and he also wanted to leave France and experience different cultures.

Appendix 4

Interview guide for Access Tutor(s) as part of Initial Study

Preamble prior to recording.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. As you know I am carrying out a study on one of the college's Access to Higher Education courses with a view to finding out why students withdraw early. The purpose of this interview is to find out about what you, as an experienced Access tutor, think about your programme and your perception of your students' experiences of the course.

The interview should take no more than an hour and the information will remain confidential. No one from the college will receive information from the interview and the responses will remain confidential.

Begin tape

1) "Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. Tell me a little bit about the Access course and your involvement with the programme".

Respondent's reply

**Reflective statement. Summarise understanding of the informant's statement*

**Invitation to elaborate. "I'd like to hear more of your views on that".*

**Declaration of perplexity. "I'm confused about what you are saying".*

2) "Do you have a feeling that Access is somehow different from other courses? If so in what way?"

3) "Do you see Access as a 'movement' or having a particular philosophy?"

4) "How do you feel about tutoring and teaching on the Access course?"

5) "You have been involved with Access for a few years now. Do you feel that the cohort has changed in that time and, if so, in what way?"

6) "Could you describe a typical Access student?"

7) "As a tutor you must get to know about your students likes and dislikes about the course. Can you tell me what they say?"

Prompt – content, structure, timetable, ethos, teaching and learning, assessments

- 8) “All the Access tutors I speak to come across students who leave the course before completion.” Why do you think this is?”
- 9) “As you know the college has a policy of improving student retention. Can you tell me of any strategies that have addressed this and, if so, have they been effective?”
- 10) “Can you tell when a student may be about to dropout and if so what are the signs?”
- 11) “Do you think more could be done to prevent students withdrawing early and if so, what could you suggest?”
- 12) “Research into dropout has suggested that the reasons are complex, multiple and inter-related. What do you think causes early withdrawal?”
- 13) “Do you think the students’ level of group involvement is a factor in retention/withdrawal? Do you have any examples you could share to illustrate your thinking on this?”
- 14) “I know from the course I teach on that some students have already stopped attending and are probably going to be withdrawn.” Are you finding this and if so what do think the reasons are?”
- 15) “Of course, many students complete the course and go to university. Can you tell me something about these students?”

*use after each response if appropriate

Thank you for your time

Appendix 5

Interview Guide

Student focus groups for Initial Study

Preamble prior to recording.

I am carrying out a study into the experience of Access students and as part of this study I am interested in finding out your thoughts.

I expect the interview to take no more than an hour. The information will remain confidential and no one from the college will receive information from the interview and the responses will remain confidential.

- 1) "What do you think about the Access course?"
- 2) "What were your reasons for joining the Access course at this college?"
- 3) "What was the reaction of your family and friends to your decision to go to college?"

Possible prompt as follow up to (3) if required: "Do you think your family and friends have been supportive now you are studying at the college?"

Possible prompt as follow up to (3) if required: "Do you feel friends/family treat you differently now you are a student?"

- 4) "Has the reality of your experience at college matched your expectations?"
- 5) "Do you feel you have changed as a person since becoming a student and if so can you explain in what way?"

Possible prompt as follow up to (5) if required: "Can you describe the changes to your life that have arisen as a consequence of the decision you made to go to college?"

Possible prompt as follow up to (5) : "Has your new status as a student changed the way you feel about yourself and if so how?"

Possible prompt as follow up to (5) : "Can you describe the changes to your life that have arisen as a consequence of the decision you made to go to college?"

- 6) "How would you describe your relationship with staff and students?"
- 7) "How do you think you have fitted in at the college?"

8) "Can you tell me about your relationship with others in your class?"

9) "Is there anything you do not like about your life as a student?"

Prompt: the college, the course, the students, external constraints, attitudes of friends/family

10) "Is there anything you do not like about your life as a student?"

Prompt: the college, the course, the students, external constraints, attitudes of friends/family

11) Tutors tell me that very often it is the students themselves who know best why their colleagues fail to complete the course. "What do you think the reasons are?"

Possible prompt as follow up to (11) : "Do you think that students who leave early have any real choice?"

Possible prompt as follow up to (11) : "do you thing the college could have done anything to prevent it happening?"

Possible prompt as follow up to (11) : "have any of you felt that you might give the course up. "If so what reasons?" "What caused you to change your mind?"

Appendix 6

Interview Guide

First interview with students for Main Study

Interview Guide

- 1) "Why did you choose to apply to study on the Access course at this time?"
- 2) "Why did you choose business studies"
- 3) "What is it like to be in a classroom again, being a student?"
- 4) "Do you think you have fitted in at the college?"
- 5) "Has the reality of your experience at college matched your expectations?"
- 6) "What was the reaction of your family and friends when you told them that you were going to college?"
- 7) "Do your friends and family treat you differently now you are a student and if so, in what way?"
- 8) "In what ways has your life changed since becoming a student?"
- 9) "What is your family and educational background?"
- 10) "Why didn't you go to university after school?"
- 11) "Do you find that your fellow students have supported your learning? If so please describe the nature of that support."
- 12) "Students vary widely in terms of age and background". "What effect, if any, does this have upon teaching and learning?"
- 13) "Do you think your teachers use students' experiences to support teaching and learning? If so, please give some examples".

- 14) "How would you describe your relationships with your teachers and other staff at the college?"
- 15) "Is there anything the college could do to make your life as a student easier?"
- 16) "What would you change in your life, if you could, to make your student role easier?"

Appendix 7

Interview Guide

Second interview with students for Main Study

1) “How do you feel now you know you are going to university?”

Probe:

- Reasons for choice of university/course

2) “How has your previous experience of education affected the way you study on the Access course?”

(Student habitus is shaped by educational experience. How a student experienced education prior to the Access course will impact upon how they experience it now)

Probe:

- What previous experience? (formal, informal, school, post school)
How would you describe your previous experience of education?
(Good, bad)
- What was your attitude towards education and studying?
- What did you think of your own abilities as a pupil/student
- What did others think of your educational ability?
- What did you think of your own ability to succeed on the course?
- How different is the Access course from earlier experience(s)? (What differences e.g. teaching learning, assessment, cultural setting)

3) “In what ways has being on an Access course changed you as a person and as a student?”

(The Access course is about sociological repositioning, restructuring habitus and changes to identity)

Probe:

- What is your attitude now towards education and studying
(changed/unchanged)?
- Have you changed the way you study since being on the course? (yes, no – expand)

- What is your view of your ability to succeed as a student at university?
- Describe your strengths and weaknesses as a student. How has the course helped you to realise these strengths/weaknesses?
- Has the course changed you as a person? (confidence, abilities)
- Has being on the course changed your relationship with others? (other students, friends/family)

4) “Can you think of anything that has made it difficult for you to continue on the course?”

Probe:

- Why ‘yes’, why ‘no’
- Prior education/experience
- Preparation for the course
- External constraints (time, travel, work, social, personal)
- Course (subjects, assignments, time management)
- Support (teacher, student, financial, social, family, friends)
- Relationships with students, staff, working with students from different backgrounds/cultures
- Motivation/attitude/behaviour
- If difficulties, how were they overcome?

5) How have you learnt on the course?

(The course is a community of practice where systems of relations between individuals [sustained interaction] leads to the construction of identities)

Probe:

- From teachers – in what ways, approaches that worked
- Support networks:
 - The group as a whole (behaviour, relationship with others, approaches to study)

- Small group/individuals
- How do groups form? (gender, age, ethnicity)
- Yourself – organisation of homework

6) “How could the problem of student drop-out be solved?”

Probe:

- Why do you think some students have dropped out of the course? (academic, time, external constraints, motivation)
- ‘Better’ : recruitment, tutoring, teaching, support (academic, financial)
- Does having students from different backgrounds/cultures affect the course?
- What suggestions do you have to improve the course?